the hot box

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Summary

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Chapter 1

If Coach Reeve hadn't seen him kick a goal first, Johnny's convinced the fight with Bobby would've had him off the team. It would not be the last time people made an exception for Daniel LaRusso.

First chance he gets, LaRusso heads a ball straight at Johnny's junk. And all the while Johnny's bent over, red-faced and gasping, Coach is standing there looking like god's come to earth and he happens to look like a short Italian prick.

(Coach was always going on about the team needing to be better at heading. Coach had priorities that didn't involve Johnny's future ability to make kids.)

He makes LaRusso striker. Johnny's center forward.

Which means they're stuck together.

Practices start with three-mile runs through the neighborhood, and on their second day, Johnny spends the entire first mile trying to convince his friends that they need to jump LaRusso. Dutch and Jim are game but Bobby puts an end to it real quick.

“It's over, man. You're just going to have deal.”

“It doesn't have to be over,” insists Johnny.

“Kid can't kick a ball with a broken leg,” says Dutch, and yeah, maybe he takes things too far sometimes but Johnny can't fault his spirit.

Johnny looks ahead to where LaRusso is jogging by himself. How does someone with such skinny legs even get into soccer? Doesn't he realize he's all wrong for the sport? First karate, now this. What a joke.

“Johnny, think about what Sensei would say.”

He narrows his eyes. “That Dutch is right about the broken leg thing?”

“No,” says Bobby patiently. “He'd say take that anger and put it into your workout.”

Which – whatever.

They end up getting paired for drills all the time, because Coach Reeve doesn't understand crucial facts like *they hate each other*.

They find out quick that Johnny's more powerful but LaRusso's quicker, and when playing against Tommy on defense LaRusso can get around him and put the ball where Johnny needs it to be without having to shout at each other about it. Coach Reeve looks happier than that time he got too drunk at a booster club spaghetti dinner and kissed the vice principal's wife, and it's terrible.

“This is gonna be the year, boys,” crows Coach, shaking LaRusso's shoulder vigorously.

LaRusso catches Johnny's eye and they glare at each other.

“This is gonna be *the* year!”

LaRusso is supposed to be practicing square passes but instead he is smiling and making eyes at Ali across the field and just generally wasting Johnny's goddamn time.

He shoots a ball into the net, waits a few more seconds, and then says loudly, “Hey, dickhead. You wanted to be on this team so bad, how about we do the drill? You know, like sometime today?”

The smile slides off LaRusso's face as he looks over, bright eyes turning hard. He shakes his head and mutters something under his breath and passes the next ball. It comes in hot and a little wild, but Johnny still sweeps it into the goal. He smirks triumphantly over at the other boy, but he is looking at Ali again.

So that's how it's gonna be.

Johnny sends the ball into the air with his knee and heads it to LaRusso, hoping like he did every time that he'll get distracted: mess

up the receiving and break his nose or something. And just like every time, LaRusso sends it neatly back to him.

“So you're not dating anymore, Ali said. Haven't been for a while.”

Johnny grits his teeth and hits the ball with his forehead. “What's your point?”

LaRusso keeps his eyes on the ball. He pushs up onto his toes and heads the ball again. “So, I don't know, man. Maybe stop acting like you own her?”

“You don't know what you're talking about. And, anyway, you're breaking the code.”

“What *code*?” LaRusso's voice can be so grating.

Johnny snatches the ball out of the air and puts it under his arm, glaring at him. “The code where you don't date your teammate's ex.”

“Oh, we're teammates now?” says LaRusso. “On the warm-up run yesterday, you tried to push me into traffic, but now because you want something, we're teammates.”

“I'm just thinking about team, like, cohesion and morale, man. You've got a bad attitude.” Johnny spins the ball back into the air and heads it at him. LaRusso rolls his eyes and returns it and then lifts the hem of his shirt to wipe at his face.

The ball lands wrong on Johnny's nose. He bends over, cupping it and spluttering.

Later, Johnny sits on the grass off to the side with his shirt around his neck and seethes. Water from the ice pack trickles down his face and drops on his bare chest like little icy needles. This is so stupid.

Tommy jogs over to get some water from the cooler. He glances at him. “How's the nose?”

Johnny grunts. “Fine, not like I haven't taken worse hits in the dojo.” Tommy nods in agreement; one of the first training exercises Sensei makes his students do is take a punch to the nose. It is memorable.

“What's going on over there,” says Johnny, nodding across the field.

“Six on four. You gonna rejoin anytime soon? Bobby's like five minutes away from making friends with the new kid, I swear.”

“Bobby's a traitor,” says Johnny, but he stands and drops the ice pack on the grass, because it is his duty to make sure his friends don't do anything stupid, like being nice to assholes.

Johnny is leading the team in stretching, calling out odd numbers as they reply with the even. LaRusso's voice is somehow able to stand out alone from the rest and it is distracting. His stupid accent.

They are all on their backs, working on their hamstrings, and Johnny can see LaRusso a few feet away, pulling his leg so far back towards his chest he can probably kiss his knee cap without much effort. Of course he is stupid flexible, he thinks. Small guy like that, he probably did gymnastics or some crap.

He realizes the team has trailed off into a confused silence, because he's stopped counting, so he hurriedly turns his head to stare up at the blue, blue sky and shouts at the top of his lungs, “*Fifteen*!”

“...Sixteen,” choruses the team.

“Seventeen!”

And so on.

“Lawrence,” says Coach from the sidelines one day a couple weeks into training. “Get over here.”

Johnny jogs over, eyes falling immediately to the dark arm band in the man's hand. He swallows and raises his chin, suppressing a smile. He knew it. He *knew* it. This is gonna be his year after all.

Coach Reeve holds the band up in the air and says sternly, “Yeah, it's yours, but don't get too excited there. I'm expecting a lot of hard work out of you.”

He nods quickly. “Of course, Coach.” He isn't afraid of hard work, never has been.

“And I'm expecting leadership.” Another nod; he can't take his eyes off the captain's arm band. “That means you need to patch over whatever

problem you have with Daniel LaRusso."

Johnny's eyes snap up. "But – "

Coach Reeve raises his eyebrows. "You think I'm blind? Kid could get the back of the net with a corner kick and your little karate group treats him like he pisses in your cereal every morning. Lock it down, or I'll find someone else to captain. Like Parker."

"*Coach*," he says in horror.

"I'm not saying you have to be friends, but I expect you to be teammates." He claps Johnny on the shoulder and drops the armband into his waiting hands. "Get your boys in line, Captain."

Chapter 2

In the first half of their first game of the season, a midfielder from Palisades does a sliding tackle on LaRusso that happens to take out his leg from beneath him. And Johnny doesn't know if he also said something or what, but suddenly he and Parker have to jog over and talk LaRusso down before he gets his stupid ass thrown from the game.

Which, don't get him wrong, Johnny would be *de*lighted if that happened. But Coach is also over on the side of the field, sending him these meaningful glares and tapping a spot on his arm that happens to match where Johnny's captain armband sits.

Years and years Johnny's worked to be captain, and now it means he has to mind this kid? Such bullshit.

“C'mon,” says Johnny, pulling at him. LaRusso is running hot, they all are from the cloudless afternoon game, and the thin shoulder beneath his hand is a bristling knot of wiry muscle. Johnny looks into the other boy's eyes and makes a noise of disbelief. “Jesus, LaRusso, you mean to tell me you're like this with *everybody*?”

He shakes Johnny's hand off. “Like what?” he snaps.

Johnny shakes his head and bites back a laugh. “Nothing. Hey, try not to get yourself carded before the half? I'd like to score at some point.”

“Not likely, way you're covering your left so far,” LaRusso shoots back, neatly killing Johnny's desire to laugh and reminding him they are not friends, and barely even teammates.

Daniel takes his penalty kick, and when he makes the point – the Palisades' goalie diving and grabbing nothing but air as the ball sails into the top corner of the net – Johnny cheers alongside the rest of his team. A point is a point, after all. The others converge on LaRusso with shouts and congratulations, and he hangs back and settles for giving the other boy a single solitary nod.

He doesn't get what Ali even sees in the guy – and she is definitely into him, because she showed up to watch the game. Johnny couldn't get her interested in soccer even *once* last year, and here she is cheering LaRusso on like it is the freaking semi finals of the World Cup.

What's the appeal? He is full of himself. He is short. When he gets angry, which is basically all the time, his hands ball into fists and his whole body seems to thrum with it, this unhinged energy that plainly says he'd like nothing more than to knock the living daylights out of you. And worst of all: he can't actually fight, so it is all this hilarious empty threat! The kid is a joke.

It has to be his attitude, Johnny decides as he stretches on the side of the field at the half and watches LaRusso chat Ali up. Chicks dig confidence, and LaRusso walks around like he owns the place.

“I don't know,” says Bobby, beside him. “I think you're overthinking this. Daniel's alright. Kinda funny, even.”

“You're a traitor,” says Johnny automatically, not looking away from where LaRusso is leaning against the bleachers. Johnny watches his mouth hook into an easy smile and absently rubs the grass stain on his knee.

Yeah, has to be the attitude, he thinks.

They win the game 2-1 (second point to Johnny; LaRusso with the assist, what*ever*).

Coach has a stack of pizzas waiting for them in the locker room in celebration, and the team sets upon the boxes in a frenzy, trying to multitask between stripping out of their sweat-soaked jerseys and inhaling slices of pepperoni before they get cold.

Johnny is down to a towel and his birthday suit on one of the benches. He has a pizza crust jammed between his teeth as he works on a knot in his cleats when LaRusso comes and stands in front of him.

Johnny looks up at him and pinches his brow interrogatively. What now, he thinks.

LaRusso folds his hands over his skinny hips, fingers bleaching with nervous pressure. Johnny blinks at his ragged fingernails and almost doesn't hear when LaRusso clears his throat and says:

“That was, uh. A great bicycle kick.”

Johnny stares. LaRusso's dark eyes dart over him and away; his weight shifts like he is about to run for it.

Across the room, Coach Reeve is giving Johnny what is probably supposed to be a significant look.

Johnny hurriedly takes the pizza crust out of his mouth and says, a little stiffly, “Well, you, uh. Put the ball where I needed it to be, so.” He can't quite bring himself to say thanks, but LaRusso looks so relieved already, he probably would actually pass out if Johnny managed it.

With a final nod, LaRusso backs off and turns to his own locker. He drags his jersey up over his lean back. The dots of his spine flex beneath his skin.

Sounds from the rest of the locker room trickle in.

Johnny tosses his cleats to the side, deciding to ignore the knot for later. He swipes another slice of pizza and goes to take a long shower.

“Oh, look, there he is – Johnny! Sweetheart, you were amazing,” his mom calls across the parking lot.

Dutch coughs out a snicker and Johnny casts him a warning look; no one laughs at his mom. But Dutch only rolls his eyes and pulls the others away, shouting out:

“Beach later on?”

Johnny waves them off and turns back to Laura, who is standing with an unfamiliar woman with dark curly hair. He hitches his duffle bag higher on his shoulder and walks over.

“Didn't I tell you all that work this summer would pay off?” she says, reaching out grab him in a hug. She tries carding his hair back from his forehead, and he has to jerk away a little because seriously, there

are *limits*. Ali is standing twenty feet away.

“Johnny, I want you to meet my new friend, we got to talking during the half and she's just the funniest—”

“Ma!”

With a slow-cresting wave of absolute doom, Johnny turns and watches as LaRusso approaches the three of them across the parking lot. His mom's new friend shouts back at him enthusiastically, mouth running one hundred miles per hour about his penalty kick and whatever and yeah, she is definitely also from New Jersey.

Johnny can just barely hold on to his expression when she turns back to him and *thanks* him for welcoming her son to the new school.

“Yeah, well,” he says, avoiding looking at LaRusso. “I remember what it was like.”

Laura combs his hair back from his forehead again, and all he can think about is how hard he is going to punch LaRusso after this: for seeing it, for his 'ma' being *funny* in the stands or whatever, for – existing, basically.

Chapter 3

One morning Sid's on his case bad and not letting up, and it chases Johnny out of the house an hour and a half before he needs to be at school. Sensei doesn't open the dojo until mid-morning, and all the guys are probably still asleep, so he doesn't really have anywhere to go except the soccer field.

The dew-covered grass squeaks under his high-tops as he crosses to the equipment shed. He dumps his bookbag on the ground and rolls the cuffs of his jeans. He's had a key to the shed since last year, Coach knowing he never uses it for anything except exactly this:

He stands out on the open field under the lightening sky. He nudges a ball up onto his laces, propels it into the air, and starts juggling. Longest he's ever kept the ball up without losing control was a breathless forty or so minutes eight months previous, a record he hasn't managed to a approach even half of since, though he keeps trying.

He's always thought best when working out, thoughts that are tangled as bad as his headphone cord usually relaxing and slipping loose after a while. He doesn't try to rush them, just keeps his eye on the ball and focuses on the ready bend of his knee, the receptive crook of his ankle.

Traffic is just starting to pick up on the streets around the school, the rest of the city getting in on this new day action.

So between Coach and his mom, it really isn't looking like he's going to get LaRusso off the team. It's time to admit it, maybe, even if Sensei always says to never admit defeat. Because – he's not really being defeated here, is he? The guy can play soccer all right; it isn't the worst thing in the world to have a striker who can actually center a ball properly.

Though, there's still the thing with Ali. He is definitely in the way there. The sight of LaRusso crowding her in the cafeteria and hallways, mouth always running – what's he got so much to *talk* about, anyway? – it pisses Johnny off just thinking about it.

He knees the ball a little harder than necessary and has to scramble forward to catch it again. He relaxes his shoulders, breathes steadily, and keeps juggling.

These days it feels like the only place Johnny can get any peace is in the dojo. No Sid there. No Ali looking and dismissing him just as quick. And no goddamn Daniel LaRusso. Kid might be okay at soccer, but he's definitely got nothing on Johnny with karate. And that eases a little of the weird panic he's been feeling in his stomach lately: knowing if it came to it (came to it again), he could take him. And if the punk puts one foot out of line, Johnny *will*.

He realizes suddenly it's been a while since he let the ball drop. He doesn't want to check his watch out of superstitious paranoia that if he does, it'll ruin the whole thing. He just keeps juggling the ball. He lets his mind go blank, not thinking of anything in particular.

So of course he starts thinking about training the other day, when Coach had them practicing a high press: Johnny, Parker, and LaRusso working as an aggressive unit. LaRusso's style of play is so different to Johnny's. It is scrappier, angrier (what a shocker, there, right). He acts like the ball is almost incidental to the bodies he has to get through to get at it, like he wants to pick a fight with each defender he comes up against. There isn't a lot of control there, not like Johnny can just be with a ball by himself for hours, but there isn't any fear either, and there is something about how LaRusso throws himself into the fray without a thought of how he'll get himself or the ball out of it—

“You usually out here this early?” asks a voice behind him.

Johnny startles, jerking to the side. His knee misses the catch by inches and the ball hits the grass. He whirls around, looks at LaRusso standing there watching him uncertainly, and then belatedly checks his watch.

Thirty minutes. Best he's done in months.

“Why you gotta ruin *everything*?” he demands, and sends the ball spinning at the other boy's head with a vicious kick.

Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

One day during training, Johnny accidentally trips LaRusso – honest, it's an accident. LaRusso wasn't looking where he was going, his eyes weren't on the ball. If he hadn't been too busy smiling at Ali passing by with a pack of girls, he would've totally seen Johnny's leg moving for the tackle.

Of course he reacts completely out of hand. And it's not Johnny's fault he responds in kind; he's been trained for this sort of thing. It's like, instinct.

Anyway, after tearing them apart (Coach jumping back from a too-fast kick, swearing in a way Johnny's pretty sure no public school employee is supposed to in front of students), he has them run suicides on a series of cones set up across half the field.

“I will not have this season jeopardized because of this goddamn feud,” he says. And then he adds, “Lawrence, you're on thin ice with that armband. Cool it.”

Which is just unfair.

“Imagine making a bully the captain anyway, what a joke,” mutters LaRusso, passing him on his way to the touchline.

Johnny follows, seething. He hates being called a bully, he *hates* it. It's a word Ali threw at him a couple times near the end, and it's complete bullshit. A bully is someone like his stepdad, someone with power and a desire to hurt just for the sake of hurting. Johnny only ever gave what LaRusso had coming to him. The best defense was more offense, after all.

Between his longer legs and steadfast refusal to lose, Johnny ends up outstripping him, touching the first line and returning while the other boy is still making his way forward. LaRusso notices his stare and glares back through the huffing and puffing. And on it goes, back and forth, for the remaining twenty minutes of practice. It is *brutal*.

After, they both kind of collapse on the grass. Johnny listens to LaRusso's panting and tries to stifle his own, something in him

instinctively not liking the sound of them together.

Coach comes to stand over them, hands on hips. “What a sorry sight. Haven't you heard, suicides are painless?”

Johnny glances at LaRusso, who blinks back at him with complete bafflement. He lets his head thump back to the grass. “Good one, Coach,” he says dully.

“Right. Well – I'm sticking you two with equipment duty today. My kid's got a recital and the ex demands more alimony when I miss one. Swear I've got the cost of twenty minutes of piano playing down to the cent.”

Johnny only raises a leaden arm and gives a vague thumbs up.

He doesn't like being alone with LaRusso, for the obvious reasons. It feels dangerous, like any moment he's going to forget his promise to Coach and beat the snot out of him for looking at him funny or opening his mouth. Case in point:

“You know, neither of us would have to be doing this if you didn't trip me in the first place.”

Johnny clenches his jaw. He finishes stacking the cones and shoves them into LaRusso's waiting arms.

“And I don't get what your problem with me is. I mean, why can't you just let it go?” continues LaRusso.

Johnny shoves the last ball into the bag and starts doggedly dragging it over the equipment shed.

“If this is really all about Ali – you know, people move on, man. You have to learn to deal with it.”

Johnny yanks the door to the shed open and drags the ball bag inside. LaRusso follows, reaching up to set the cones down on the top shelf.

“I had this girl back home, she dumped me in May, was dating this complete gorilla by June. And you know, I coulda done something about it. I coulda pushed the guy in front of a train, make something happen – but I didn't, because that's life, man. People date, they break

up, they move on. But you don't take your hurt feelings out on the other guy, you know?"

"I don't have *hurt feelings*," snaps Johnny, finally turning to advance on the other boy, who takes a quick step back into the shelves.

Then Johnny sees Dutch and Jim at the door of the shed. They're kinda laughing to each other. Dutch meets his eyes and raises a hand in a jaunty salute. Johnny's heart sinks.

He lunges forward. "Dutch, don't you fucking—"

The door to the shed swings closed before he can reach it. The sound of the padlock clicking home might as well be a gunshot for everything it does to Johnny's pulse.

"You gotta be kidding me," says LaRusso behind him, in the dark.

Chapter End Notes

btw, Coach's joke is a reference to the theme song of M*A*S*H

Chapter 5

“I'm gonna kill him,” says Johnny, mostly to himself. “I'm actually going to kill him.”

“I'll help,” says LaRusso behind him, “if you don't kill me first.”

His pulse speeds up a little; he immediately doesn't like how it feels, hearing the other boy's voice in the dark. There's an implicit threat to it, somehow. It's too intimate – like grappling. Not a lot of grappling in karate.

“Hey. Don't tempt me, man,” is what he says, trying to sound calm.

“Yeah, whatever.” LaRusso sighs and there is a rustling like he flops down on the ground. Sure enough, his voice sounds lower when he next speaks. “So what are the odds one of the other guys saw them and are gonna come free us?”

Johnny's plan is to wait five minutes for Bobby and then try kicking the door down. “Guess we'll find out.”

He slumps against the opposite side of the shed and slides down to the ground. They are both silent, and Johnny thinks maybe they have a mutual understanding to let this horrific situation pass as quietly as possible, but then LaRusso just can't help himself, can he.

“Y'know, that's some friend you got there.”

“Shut up. Dutch is cool,” says Johnny, a little uncomfortable. “He's always had my back. He just likes to mess around a little, is all.”

“Right.” LaRusso doesn't sound very convinced. It digs in at Johnny, gets his hackles up. The constant presumption on this kid.

“Look – a while back, okay? Our dojo did this training exercise out in the woods. Dutch took the loss well. See, we'd split into two teams and had to fight to the last man standing—”

“What, like king of the castle, capture the flag?”

Johnny pauses – a little too long, because after a second he remembers LaRusso can't see the face he's making. “Those are *kid games*. This was to the death.”

“Right, right,” comes that stupid soft dark voice over four feet of shed floor that Johnny is absolutely prepared to cross so he can beat him into silence, “So, like, what. You the only guy left in the dojo? You killed the rest? Makes it tough to spar these days, I bet.”

“It was *metaphorical*,” snaps Johnny. “Our sensei says peace is only the lull between battles. Like, in life? There's always going to be a winner and a loser, and you can't let feelings get in the way of what needs to be done.”

“Jeez,” mutters LaRusso. “Explains a lot.”

He tenses against the wall of the shed, fists clenching. “What's that supposed to mean?”

“Nothing,” he says shortly. “Hey, I'm not looking to start a fight here. I never am,” he adds after a couple seconds.

Johnny snorts. “That's the dumbest thing I've ever heard come out of your mouth, and that's really saying something.”

“And what's *that* supposed to mean?” says LaRusso hotly. So predictable.

He slouches down against the wall. “It means you've got the worst attitude I've ever seen. Everything's a personal insult. You must've had a real easy life back in New Jersey, all I can say. It's like you think the whole damn world revolves around you.”

A slight noise, like LaRusso is shuffling around. He sounds closer, anyway. “I'm not the one who came roaring down to the beach on his hotshot bike and beat a guy up just because he was talking to a girl—”

Johnny's back comes off the wall. “That's how you saw it? Right, like you had no part in it.” It bothers him, it really bothers him, that he'd say the fight was this one-sided thing.

“Didn't you hear what I just said?” says LaRusso, and he is definitely closer now; Johnny can feel the heat of his body, his words in the air between them. “I had a part, and it was being *assaulted* by a—”

Which a shocking clang and drag, the shed door is thrown open. They both flinch, hands coming up to block their eyes from the sudden flood of light. That they're less than a foot apart only registers seconds later, and they hurriedly shove away, and up.

Bobby stares at them, a little perplexed. “Everything – alright?”

LaRusso is up and shoving past him in seconds, because he was probably raised by like, fucking mafia henchmen or some shit. “Yeah. Thanks, man,” he says, and then it's like he can't get away fast enough.

Johnny takes a moment longer to stand up. His body feels weird, all buzzing with adrenaline that has no place to go. A match interrupted, is what it was. He shakes his shoulders out and tries cracking his neck. No dice. He still feels on edge. Goddamn LaRusso.

Bobby stares at him. He says, “Dutch was laughing about it outside the dojo. I heard and came back.”

Johnny bends around the shed and watches LaRusso's shrinking profile across the grounds. He grits his teeth and says, “I was gonna kick the door down in a couple minutes. I'm glad you came – thanks.”

He turns and locks the shed up again, and Bobby says behind him, slightly laughing:

“You know, I wasn't sure I was going to find anyone alive. Johnny, you guys were in there for over an hour.”

Chapter 6

Johnny gets called out of karate early one evening because his mom wants to have dinner across the street. He doesn't realize until he's standing over the table that she meant *with company*.

“Oh,” he says, looking down at LaRusso, who watches him back with dark-eyed trepidation. “...Right.”

“Isn't this nice?” says LaRusso's mom, horrifically enthusiastic. “We realized this place was right across from your little dojo and it just seemed *perfect*.”

“I can't believe I've never come here before,” confesses Laura. The smile she directs up to Johnny is devastatingly free and happy. “Their cocktails are amazing.”

The situation clearly isn't going to go away no matter how hard he wants it to, so Johnny dumps his bag below the table and grabs a chair. Ignoring LaRusso, he ducks his head to study the menu. He pushes his headband back a little, self-conscious and using his hand for cover from the other boy's gaze.

“So, how was karate?” asks Laura. When he glances at her, he notices her smile below the cheer is a little nervous. Like she so desperately wants this shit to work out. It's been a while since she socialized with anyone – Sid got jealous, made it difficult.

Something in Johnny pitches and swings, and eventually settles, leaden. He thinks all at once – fuck it. Forget LaRusso, he isn't worth it.

“It was good,” he says, sliding a smile back at her. “Got my leg so high, bet I could out kick a cheerleader.”

Both women laugh. And when he glances at LaRusso, Daniel's even grinning a little.

The whole dinner is almost unbearable for how bearable it is. Daniel and his mom have an easy, engaging back-and-forth that delights Laura from the get-go, this Jersey comedy duo. And Laura suddenly

has opinions on all sorts of things about the city that he's never heard before, on everything from the neighborhood hair salons to road construction to the upcoming city election.

They skip dessert and Laura sticks to only two drinks, and before Johnny knows it, he and Daniel are standing on the darkening street corner, watching their mothers drive off together in Laura's convertible, hands waving in the air back at them.

“Well, that was weird,” announces Daniel, and turns to unchain his bike from the light post. “Let's do it again never, yeah?”

“Right,” says Johnny. He shoves his hands in his pockets and watches him for a moment. He saw the other guys leave the dojo forty minutes ago through the restaurant window, and he doesn't really have anything to do. He usually tries to avoid home until Sid's either retreated into his study or gone to sleep, neither of which happens before nine o'clock.

“Hey,” he says, quick before he can stop to think about it, “You maybe wanna go play some one-on-one?”

Daniel looks up from his bike, surprise and wariness all over his face. He narrows his eyes, and Johnny narrows his right back.

“Look, don't hurt yourself or nothing,” he says at last, turning to go. Feeling like an idiot.

“If I win, are you going to beat me up?” says Daniel to his back.

Johnny looks back at him. He lets a small smirk cross his face. “Well, you're not gonna win, LaRusso, so I really wouldn't worry about it if I were you.”

They go to an empty lot not far from Daniel's apartment building and mark out the goals with some empty beer bottles some hobo must've left behind.

“Those are Sierra Nevadas,” says Daniel, in the distinct tone of an argument.

“So?”

“So you think a hobo is drinking fancy beer?”

“Is there anything you don't have an opinion on?” Johnny wants to know. “Like, I don't know, maybe someone bought the hobo the beer. Like out of the goodness of their heart or something. Maybe the hobo stole it.”

Daniel just shakes his head. He nudges the soccer ball into the DMZ between them and looks up at Johnny saying, “Okay, so how do you want—hey!” because Johnny strikes first and takes possession of the ball.

It goes sailing between the two Sierra Nevadas and lands somewhere in the darkness with the scrubs and litter. Johnny directs a broad grin back at Daniel, who puts his hands on his skinny hips and says:

“Oh, so that's how it's gonna be?”

“Hey, at least you're not getting beat up. Count your blessings, man.”

They play for over an hour, feet tussling for the ball, and Daniel not shutting up once even as they both grow progressively more out of breath.

He's got good footwork, Johnny will give him that. They don't score many more points because they spend so much of the time just trying to keep the ball away from each other. Even when Johnny has an opportunity to take a shot, he finds himself waiting for Daniel to get close and go for it instead. Because it's more interesting, okay: trying to block his sneak attacks or figure out how to get past his clever control.

When Daniel finally ties the score at 3-3, Johnny calls it game and doesn't think too much about why. When he goes home that night, he still feels a little like he won.

Chapter 7

Bobby finds Johnny in the locker room after training. He goes to the next shower over and turns it on, and then stands there waiting for the hot water, giving him a weird look until Johnny glances over through his wet hair and says:

“What.”

“Nothing, just – you doing okay, man?”

“What, why?” Johnny's expression twists. “Yes. Why?”

Bobby ducks under the spray. “You barely glared when Daniel scored earlier. And then you offered to help him go get his foot taped.”

LaRusso's ankle was threatening tendonitis, a problem that came down to his crappy tennis shoes and some vague *exercises* he mentioned doing at home. He didn't even know the school had a sports nurse until Johnny mentioned it, and at that point it only made sense to show him the office.

But neither of those things sound like that big a deal to Johnny, which makes him wonder how serious their rivalry looked from the outside. If his own best friend is walking around thinking he is this like, unreasonable person....

“Coach made himself pretty clear about taking away my captain's band,” he says. “Just decided to get over it, you know.”

“Get over it,” repeats Bobby slowly. “That's very – mature of you, Johnny.”

“Why do you have to *say* it like that?” he demands.

“I'm not – hey, Daniel, great kick today,” he says over Johnny's shoulder.

Johnny glances around and then looks away again just as quickly before he sees much more than a wiry tan chest. He glares at Bobby, who shakes his head.

His pulse has sped up, a reaction to Bobby's dig at his temper. He says nothing to either boy but bends his head back under the spray and scrubs furiously at his hair. He keeps his eyes trained on the tiny

square shower tiles, counting the ones between his feet over and over until his brain has gone completely blank.

He finishes rinsing in record time and slaps the shower off. When he turns to leave, Daniel's got his face tipped up, eyes closed against the water. His hair is a dark tangle against his forehead and his long neck. His eyelashes are thick and long, like a freaking girl's.

Johnny grits his teeth and resists the urge to knock into his shoulder as he stalks past; the showers are a neutral zone, everyone knows that.

That night, Sensei has Johnny and Dutch spar, which is always tough. Johnny's better than Dutch on a technical level, but the other boy is ruthless. He never holds back. Some of Johnny's worst injuries in karate have come from matches with Dutch.

Case in point: the pointed jab he takes to the kidneys two minutes in. Johnny pushes through the pain, knocks Dutch off balance, and finishes with a front kick.

Dutch is on the mat, breath knocked out of him. His eyes are wide on Johnny, equal parts urgent and furious. If he's going to lose, he wants it over with quick, which Johnny gets. It's the humiliation they all fear, that suspended moment as they await judgment from above. It's been a while since Johnny wasn't top dog, but he remembers the fear. It's the kind of thing that stays with you.

“Mr. Lawrence,” says Sensei, and that is all he has to say. Judgment rendered: finish him.

Johnny doesn't waste time; he bends and strikes Dutch in the solar plexus. It's transactional, the pain a currency – something he delivers and Dutch accepts.

Dutch curls into the blow and quickly rolls to his feet, head bent so no one can see his expression. They both resume their positions around the edge of the mat, and Sensei announces the next match. Once back in line, Johnny lets out a quiet breath.

If losing equals pain, winning brings relief. Both are temporary.

Chapter 8

No one speaks after the game. They don't look at each other or much of anything but the floor and even then all they are all seeing are the mistakes they'd made that day. The only sound in the locker room is the clang of metal and scratch of shinguards being removed.

Johnny sits down heavily in front of his locker and braces his hands on the bench. His sweat-soaked fringe hangs over his eyes. He is too tired to even push it back. (If high school soccer didn't have stupid rules about headbands, it wouldn't be an issue.)

Daniel is across from him, not moving an inch to get out of his gear. He's got mud from the tackle late in the second half coating his cleats, his legs, making his shorts and jersey stick heavily to his skin. He doesn't seem to notice; his head is bowed. Johnny wonders what he's thinking, if he ever beats himself up like the rest of them do.

Coach walks in and even though nobody's talking anyway, the room falls silent. They brace themselves.

He looks around and says, “Edison. They're always a tough one. We'll talk about it next practice, but I want you all thinking about what you could've done different out there, because that was a disaster.” He zeroed in on Johnny and pitched his voice slightly. “Lawrence, LaRusso.” Out of the corner of his eye, Johnny sees Daniel jump slightly. But Coach only says gruffly, “Nice work on saving us from a blow-out.”

They were down three to zero with only two minutes remaining. But Daniel had sprinted forward like they weren't all running on fumes and tackled the midfielder from Edison. The field was a mess by then, torn up by rain and cleats, and both players went skating down to the mud. When they emerged Daniel sent the ball flying to Johnny, who'd trapped it against his chest, kneed it into the air, and headed it into the corner of the net. It was a pointless goal.

Johnny meets Daniel's eyes for a second across the locker room.

A pointless goal. But it was something.

Two days later in study hall, Ali drops a tall stack of books loudly on the table Johnny's sitting at, and he jerks in surprise, ruining the message he's spent the past twenty minutes painstakingly scratching into the desktop with an empty pen.

She takes the seat beside him and angles a look at the carving. “You misspelled Kowalczyk. It's Polish, it ends with 'czyk' not check.”

“Maybe I did that on purpose,” he says, hand automatically coming down to cover the carving, in case the librarian walked by to shush them. “Y'know, to point out what a stupid name he has.”

“Antagonizing the Vice Principal. What a worthwhile way to spend senior year.”

He doesn't know why she always assumes the dumbest of him. “He's not going to know it's *me*.”

She reaches for the top textbook on her stack, pulling it close and starting to page through it. “Johnny, you sit at this table every day. It wouldn't be hard to narrow down the suspects, and there's a good chance the students from other periods don't have a detention rap sheet a mile long.”

He drops the pen and gives up, his masterpiece only half finished. After a couple seconds rocking back on the back legs of his chair, he blinks and says, “Wait, what are you doing right now? I thought you were still pissed at me.”

Ali tucks a lock of wavy ash blonde hair behind her ear and writes something down in her notebook. When she speaks again, her voice is measured and wary. “I figured, since it looked like you declared truce with Daniel, we might too.”

He squints at her, not getting it. “What, you wanna go out again?” Not what he was expecting, but he can work with this.

Except Ali is shaking her head. “Friends, Johnny,” she says, enunciating carefully. “I thought we could be friends again. We were once, remember?”

“Yeah, when we were like *thirteen*,” he says. He'd been the new kid in the country club, surrounded by impossibly rich, over-dressed adults who did nothing but talk about things like marginal tax rates and tort reform and other made-up topics. Ali was the first kid around who bothered talking to him. Back then, he could make her laugh all the

time.

Now it's Daniel making her laugh. He must be some funny kid, because it seems like she's doing it all the time, whenever Johnny glances their way.

“I liked you better at thirteen,” says Ali. “Before you started all that Cobra Kai crap. You were nice.”

He didn't want to hear this; he's heard it about a thousand times before. “I was a doormat, you mean.”

“Being shy is not the same as a doormat – look, sorry, I don't actually want to talk about karate. I didn't mean to bring it up.” She looks at him sidelong, tapping her pen on the table. “Friends, Johnny. Take it or leave it.”

He lets the chair thump back to all four legs. “Does this mean LaRusso's going to be coming to all the parties?”

She only arches her eyebrows. Waiting.

He sighs. “Okay! Friends, I guess.”

He figures if he and Ali start hanging out again, it's only a matter of time before she gets worn down and loves him again. If he has to put up with Daniel hanging around in the meantime, so be it. Johnny can be patient.

Chapter 9

The school Halloween party is as boring and lame as always. The synth pop the DJ keeps blasting echoes badly off the gym walls, turning the already warbling sound into a gravy of noise with a barely-discernible beat.

Johnny occupies his time during the dance in the usual fashion; that is, he sneaks drinks with Dutch and wanders the edges of the room talking to the guys and making fun of people's costumes.

(He never dances at these things. Dancing is reserved for when he gets dragged to the country club, it's not something he does for fun.)

Two hours in, he gets some weed from Jim and goes to roll the night's clip of joints in the bathroom. He's feeling loose from the whiskey Dutch gave him. Between the music on his walkmen and the routine of packing and rolling, he almost forgets the others are expecting him; he could probably stay there jamming by himself all night.

When he finally shuffles out of the stall, Daniel is there, washing his hands. He's wearing a shower curtain on a back brace, which – why. Why is he like this. They are in high school, which means costumes are only acceptable if they make you look 1) hot, if you're a chick or 2) badass, if you're a guy. Those are the rules.

Daniel looks up and catches sight of him in the mirror. His dark eyes widen for a second in surprise and then just as quickly narrow.

Johnny sighs to himself and lifts one side of the headphones. “What.”

“Nothing, man. Just – you're at a school dance, and you're sitting in the bathroom listening to your own music?"

“Do you hear the crap they're playing out there?” And he starts to leave, but Daniel isn't done.

“Aren't you gonna wash your hands?”

He pivots on his heel and lifts one of the joints. “Not the kind of business I was doing.” And when comprehension fills Daniel's face, Johnny hesitates. Suddenly feeling reckless. “You here with Ali?”

“I've seen her,” says Daniel warily, probably expecting him to freak out. Right instincts but wrong suspicion; Johnny's sneakier than that.

“So, uh. A bunch of us are splitting off and heading down to the beach. You guys wanna come?”

Which is how Johnny ends up getting really fucked up with Daniel LaRusso at Halloween.

“How do you guys tell each other apart, anyway?” asks Daniel when they're all down on the sand. He's talking big for a shortass who hid behind a shower curtain, which Johnny would point out if he wasn't busy lighting the driftwood bonfire. “Only one I know on sight is Lawrence, and that's 'cause he's not wearing the hood.”

The lighter finally sparks and Johnny sits back on his heels. “Maybe I did that on purpose.”

“Right, right, because the only thing more terrifying than a skeleton is a skeleton with inexplicable golden hair.”

And for some reason that sounded – weird. Johnny feels it in his gut and even Daniel seems to realize a second after he says it, because he immediately turns his attention to the conversation happening to his right between Ali, Susan, and Barbara. No one else seems to pick up on it, though.

“Right,” says Tommy finally putting in an appearance on the sand. He's got a backpack full of beer and starts passing them out.

Johnny wastes no time stabbing the can with his car key and shotgunning it. From open to empty in ten seconds, he's that good.

“Very impressive,” observes Ali dryly, glancing over with dark eyes. In the firelight, she's got a glow to her. She's very pretty, he thinks. He's finally got a buzz going and it has predictably made everything easier and better. Even seeing Ali sitting close next to Daniel.

He spreads his hands, modest. “I got skills the ASVAB don't know how to test for.”

Out of the corner of his eye, he sees Daniel shake his head a little and bite back a grin. Johnny feels that in his gut too.

Everybody smokes except Barbara, Ali, and Dutch (which is good; four months ago, Dutch got so paranoid he could barely move; it kind of brought the whole scene down). Johnny is surprised when he passes the joint to Daniel and the other boy actually accepts it. He must be too obvious about it, because Daniel says, weirdly-aggressive:

“What? You think we don't got pot in New Jersey?”

“More like I'm shocked you'd smoke it,” returns Johnny. “You sure your heart can take chilling out for once? It's not going to freak out and stop altogether?”

Challenge dropped.

Daniel licks his bottom lip and shakes his head a little, disbelieving. He takes hold of the joint, holding it pinched between his slim fingers; he looks up and locks eyes with Johnny and takes a long drag, not looking away.

Challenge accepted.

Chapter 10

“That,” says... Judy, he thinks, ten minutes or two hours later, “was the dumbest thing I've ever seen. God, Ali. Your taste in boys, I swear.”

“Hey,” said Tommy loyally, “It's not Johnny's fault LaRusso's crazy competitive.”

“Right, because you Cobra Kais know nothing about that.” Ali, dry but not really amused.

Johnny can't really listen to them past that, because it's a little overwhelming: splitting his focus. It takes a lot of concentration just to nod along to Daniel and act normal. He sits and listens and drags his hands through the sand, because the feeling is very cool. He thinks he can feel each individual grain against his fingertips.

“...get that, right? It's not *us* actually bending it, but we're the ones creating the, the system of conditions that allow it to happen. And that's almost better, right? To be the one in control and – designing it, planning it. Like it's so much cooler to think, well, alright. Y'know, if I, if I hit the ball at *this* angle and time it right – and, think about it Johnny, think about all the stuff you don't know—”

“I do,” he says, feeling quite desperately earnest. “All the time. It's a lot.”

“But you actually know more than you *think* you know,” says Daniel, triumphant. He's practically hovering over the sand as he sits forward on his shins to make his point. “Because you know if you, you kick the ball at a certain point in the field with a certain amount of power, right?”

“Right.”

“And if you put the right spin on it, you know that by the time the ball travels from where you were to the net,” and Daniel's gesturing, his right hand is Johnny and his left is the ball, “it's speed will drop and the spin on the ball will start to make it curve. The air around the ball is like a force field, we create *force fields*, man. Think about that.”

And Johnny tries to think about it, but it's really, really hard. And he keeps getting distracted by the dryness in his eyes, his throat. He don't

understand how Daniel has the spit to even be talking right now.

Bobby lands next to him, and Johnny swears he can hear the slight poof of displaced sand exploding up from the impact zone around his knees. He blinks down at them and is then surprised as a beer appears in front of his nose.

“Here,” says Bobby, “Maybe it'll help bring you down a little.”

And this is why Bobby is the best friend a guy could ask for.

“Oh, hey,” says Daniel brightly, “Can I have one?”

“I think the ground is spinning,” says Johnny.

“It is, the earth is spinning through space.”

“You are such,” he sighs out, “a nerd.”

He and Daniel are stretched out on the sand on their backs and staring up at the dark sky. This close to the city, there aren't many stars, so Johnny feels all the more attached to the few that poke their way through. Like, those stars fought to be seen. They deserve recognition.

There is music playing behind them, near the fire. Bad music, so it's probably one of the girls' radios. But even bad music sounds kinda good right now. Just like the waves way down in the darkness beyond their feet sound good, and how Daniel breathing right next to him is good.

“Do you really think it's possible to not know what you don't know you know?” asks Johnny. He feels weird, like he's hovering on the tip of something enormous but hidden, an iceberg like the one that took out the Titanic. But he's feeling too boneless to tense up about it just now.

“I don't know,” says Daniel. He sounds almost wistful.

It quiet when Johnny wakes up. Quiet and cold; it's really late.

He and Daniel are curled on their sides towards each other like two

parentheses missing a filling, practically nose-to-nose. Johnny blinks, eyes going wide. Daniel doesn't stir so much as shiver, because he's still asleep, and it's cold and that's why they were turned to each other like this, that's all. That's all.

“Johnny.”

He shoves up on his elbow and looks over in the direction where the fire used to be. It's cold and stamped out now, and the group is gone. There is only Bobby left.

“C'mon, man, it's really late. We gotta go.”

“Yeah,” says Johnny, scraping a hand over his eyes. They still burn faintly. “Man, what the fuck,” he mutters.

“You guys got kind of carried away with the joint. But it's okay, I don't think anyone else noticed anything.”

“Huh?” He squints up at him, but Bobby only shakes his head. There's a strange, grim set to his mouth. He looks worried.

“C'mon,” Bobby says again. “You can crash at my place tonight,” because Bobby knows Johnny'd catch hell if he went home at this hour, “and we gotta get him back, probably.” Meaning Daniel.

Johnny looks back down at Daniel, still passed out next to him. His eyebrows are pinched slightly, and eyes are moving below his lids, like he's dreaming or thinking really hard about something. He fits right up against Johnny like he belongs there, and Johnny wants to kiss him awake and *fuck*, please God, no.

The blood drains from his face, and he feels cold all over. Because Johnny knows. He suddenly knows, and he wishes like hell he didn't.

Then he looks up and sees Bobby's face, and realizes he knows too.

Chapter 11

“I don't,” says Johnny, scrambling up from the sand. “I'm not.”

“Johnny, it's okay,” says Bobby quickly. “No one else knows.”

His face feels impossibly hot, and he's breathing like he just tried to tie off one of their practice runs with a 100-meter dash. “'Cause there's nothing to know!”

“They don't remember what you were like with Ali a couple years ago,” he continued, horrifyingly. “They think you hate him.”

“I do hate him. I hate his guts.”

“Okay.”

“So whatever you think you saw – you're wrong, and you didn't.”

“Okay.”

“Stop saying *okay*,” he shouts. “Jesus fucking Christ, Bobby!”

Bobby opens his mouth and then hesitates, brow knitting. After a second he shuts it again and sighs, puts his hands on his hips and looks off into the darkness like he's questioning the deep, impenetrable mysteries of the universe or some shit.

“Let's just – go, alright?” says Johnny, starting forward.

“Johnny.”

“What?” he says flatly.

Bobby stares at him meaningfully. “We can't just leave him here.”

“Why the fuck not? It's his own fault, he shouldn't've fallen asleep. Who does that at a party, anyway?” Bobby's answering silence feels really judgey. “And before you say it, I didn't fall asleep. I passed out like a man.”

“Well, how about you wake him up like a man.”

Johnny's face, which had finally started to recede a little in terms of egg fryability, flames again. He is very thankful for the darkness.

“Oh my god,” Daniel groans at his feet, startling Johnny backwards two steps. He pushes up on an elbow and looks around, face scrunched in sleepy confusion. Johnny has never hated anyone more in his entire life. “What the hell?”

“Great,” says Johnny. “He's awake. Can we go now?”

The drive to Reseda is mostly silent, Daniel murmuring directions to Bobby and otherwise for once in his life remaining silent. Every time Johnny dares glance back at him, he's frowning thoughtfully out the window. But Johnny doesn't glance very often, or for very long.

After they drop Daniel at his apartment complex, Johnny tells Bobby, a little stiffly, that he should take him back to Sid's. In some strange, hateful way, he thinks getting yelled at is exactly what he deserves just then. And he thinks Bobby will probably be secretly relieved to have him out of his car. This way he is free from the obligation of letting Johnny in his bedroom and then lying awake all night vigilant in case he tried something.

“You're staying at mine tonight, remember?” says Bobby; dumb for a smart guy.

Johnny can only shake his head. He doesn't know what to say.

“Johnny,” he says. “Look, I'm not saying you should announce it to the school, or even tell like, Dutch. But this is me we're talking about. You gotta know I don't care. I mean, you know what my parents like.”

Bobby's parents are total hippies, in every way that didn't affect their pocketbooks. They provide Bobby with pot and talk openly about sex and plan to vote for Mondale in November. But still, there are *limits*.

“You're seriously going to sit there and try to tell me it doesn't make you sick?” God, why him. It just isn't fucking fair.

“It doesn't make me sick,” says Bobby evenly.

“Well, fine. It makes me sick enough for the both of us,” he decides.

“I'm saying, this doesn't have to change anything. It's not like you even have to do anything with it. But now – now you know.”

They had a science teacher freshman year who liked to say knowledge is power; it was in retrospect possibly dumbest thing Johnny's ever heard.

Chapter 12

He can't beat up LaRusso, and it isn't really possible to beat up himself, so Johnny takes out everything in training. He hits bags and the other students and stupid plastic fake heads until his mind is perfectly blank and his knuckles bleed, and at the end of those sessions Sensei says:

“I was starting to wonder about you, Mr. Lawrence, but I see you've turned a corner. Keep it up.”

And Johnny feels a mixture of pride and shame – pride for doing at least one thing right; shame that Sensei doesn't know the source of his dedication. But it's the results that matter, he thinks. It's like Bobby said – he doesn't have to *do* anything with this shit. It can be ignored. It can be buried.

Johnny lets himself feel a flicker of the soft, curious draw to LaRusso he'd felt on the beach; he lets it come on like an enemy advancing across the mat – and then he strikes.

Things are less simple outside of the dojo.

“What the *hell*, Johnny?” demands LaRusso at the half. He comes storming into the locker room, walks right up to Johnny and shoves him, and Johnny's entire body tightens up like its on a winch. His fists ball at his sides, and Bobby looks at him from a couple lockers down, a warning clear on his face.

“Watch who you're trying to push,” he says, instead of hitting him. “Don't forget I can kick your ass anytime I want.”

LaRusso's eyes are dark with anger; he looks like he's running hot with it all over. Johnny can practically feels it coming off him in waves. “I was open. Why didn't you pass me the ball?”

“Didn't see you.”

He steps in close, eyes narrowed. “Bullshit. You've been ignoring me

all week at practice too."

Johnny doesn't back down, never mind the danger setting off sirens in his head. "You're imagining things. Now get out of my face before I knock you down."

"If you both don't want to be benched for the rest of the game, you'll separate and cool off now," says Coach. "My back isn't what it used to be, and if I throw it breaking up a stupid fight, I will take it out on you."

LaRusso and Johnny don't look away from one another for a long moment, but then LaRusso's face twists and he turns away, aiming a furious kick at a water bottle that sends it flying against the wall.

"Hey, that was – that one was mine," says Parker.

They win the game, no thanks to LaRusso, and afterwards Johnny sees him talking to Ali in the parking lot, clearly still pissed and directing dirty looks in his direction. Ali frowns and says something, and Daniel shakes his head. They both turn away, and Johnny watches them go.

An engine roars and Dutch pulls his bike up alongside him. He follows Johnny's gaze and says, "So is the stupid truce over? Can we beat his ass?"

Ali takes Daniel's hand. Johnny catches a sideways flash of the smile he gives her.

"Yeah," he says roughly. "Truce is over."

Chapter 13

The next day, Dutch, Tommy, and Jim come into school limping. Their faces are all messed up, and Dutch looks like he's going to self-detonate if anyone makes so much as a comment about it. He slams straight past them and shoves another student when they don't get out of his way quick enough.

Johnny figures he'll be like that at least until after lunch. He turns back to see Bobby reach up and tip Jim's ball cap up. They both wince at the bruises patterning his face.

“Man, what the hell happened to you guys?” asks Johnny. “Sparring match get out of hand?”

“Don't wanna talk about it,” mumbles Jim, ducking his look and confusing them even further.

Bobby goes still as he catches sight of something across the lawn. “Johnny,” he says tensely.

He looks over and sees LaRusso, hesitating on the edge of the sidewalk and staring at them with wide, alert eyes. He's got a shiner so dark it's like a black hole trying to swallow the rest of his face, and something about the way he's holding himself means it's not the only injury.

Johnny stares back at him, his throat locking up and making speaking impossible. He forgot what it looked like when Daniel was scared of him. It doesn't make him feel tough at all anymore – it just makes him feel small, and weirdly helpless.

“Shit, Jimmy,” says Bobby. “What the hell did you guys do?”

Jim's mouth falls open in outrage. He has never looked more like the baby of the group. “Dutch said *Johnny* said the truce was over!”

Bobby turns and fixes Johnny with a look of barely-restrained impatience. Like this is *his* fault—

“I didn't mean,” Johnny didn't know what the fuck he meant, “that it was open season on the guy. I just meant,” no, seriously what the fuck did he mean? “that maybe we don't... y'know, invite him to any more parties,” he finishes lamely.

Jim and Tommy only look really confused by this. Bobby shakes his

head and cuts through them to start over towards Daniel – and then stops in his tracks as the other boy beats a quick retreat.

“Great,” say Bobby, turning back to them. “Our striker's too scared to get within ten feet of us. How do you think Coach is going to feel about that?”

Turns out Coach doesn't get a chance to share his feelings, because Daniel doesn't show up to practice.

But he does show up to the dojo.

“...An enemy deserves no mercy – what is the problem, Mr. Lawrence?” snaps Sensei when Johnny can't tear his gaze away from LaRusso standing over by the door.

He hurriedly looks forward. “Nothing, Sensei.”

“Sensei,” whispers Tommy, “that's the guy.”

Johnny's gaze is drawn back across the room, but this time he focuses on the man standing with the other boy. He's even smaller than LaRusso, but where LaRusso looks like he's two seconds from bolting like a startled fawn, the man is perfectly calm. Who the hell is he? What did Jim mean, *that's the guy?*

Sensei turns and looks at the pair. A cold smile appears on his face. “Class, we have visitors. Fall in behind me.”

As the others rush to obey, Johnny follows Sensei, a pit opening in his stomach. He instinctively doesn't like Daniel being in the dojo, and this feeling only intensifies as Sensei approaches them. Daniel doesn't belong here. He's so stupid, he's just going to get hurt. Why the fuck couldn't he just take the beating like a man and leave it alone? He can never just leave it alone.

Sensei looks at LaRusso, dismissing him after only a second in favor of folding his arms and towering over the old man.

“I hear you jumped some of my students last night,” he says, and

what? *This* guy? He had to be at least fifty.

Johnny darts a glance at Daniel before he can stop himself and then resumes staring straight ahead. He can barely hear the following conversation over the roaring in his ears. Daniel's left eyeball has a burst blood vessel in the white part. He is standing in a place he does not and can not understand, looking scared and fucked up and not seeming to realize that will only make all of this worse. Sensei is like a junkyard dog; he can sense fear.

Johnny wants to say – stop, wait. There's been a misunderstanding. But any explanation would only sound like an excuse to Sensei, and excuses were as good as an admission of weakness.

"...bothering you? The odds? Well, we can fix that. Feel like matching, Mr. Lawrence?" says Sensei, voice sharpening on his name like he can tell Johnny hasn't been listening properly.

Johnny thinks if he has to put a hand on Daniel, he'll be sick.

He stares unblinking at the wall but it's no good. He doesn't see a path, there's no way out of this. The rest of the class is arrayed at his back and Sensei is in front of him, waiting. Confident. It's like Johnny's life has swiftly become one, big trap.

He says, "Yes, Sensei!"

He doesn't think he imagines Daniel's head go back a little in his peripheral vision: a slight nod, like Johnny's confirmed something for him. Well, fuck him. *Fuck* him.

"No more fighting," says the man, and Sensei really doesn't like that; he's about thirty seconds from attacking a senior citizen.

"Name a place," he bites out after some back and forth.

The man nods his head meaningfully at the wall. "Tournament."

And somehow, just like that, Daniel is signed up to fight in the All Valley; he looks about as thrilled to hear it as Johnny feels.

"I think we can accommodate you on that," says Sensei, sounding nothing but amused now. If an impromptu sparring match appealed to him, watching a twerp like LaRusso get formally wiped out in front of a cheering crowd was the best entertainment this side of the Super Bowl. He angles a smirk back at Johnny. "Can't we, Mr. Lawrence?"

God, fuck his life.

Johnny swallows. He stares at the poster for the tournament, this event he has trained all year for and until five minutes ago, had wanted to win more than anything, and he says quietly:

“Yes, Sensei.”

Chapter 14

“Oh no,” says Laura, when she opens the door a couple nights later on the now-weekly dinner date and Daniel's mother is standing on the doorstep alone. “Where's Daniel?”

She accepts the presented bottle of wine and hands it off without looking to Johnny so she can take Lucille's coat. He hefts it in confusion as the two women continue through the house into the dining room, still talking.

“Oh, he's started some new crazy training regimen – that's what he actually called it, *training,* can you believe it? These boys, they all act like they're going to war.”

“Oh, I believe it,” his mom laughs. “You should've seen Johnny when he first started....”

Alone in the foyer, Johnny looks down at the bottle; it has a twist cap instead of a cork. He thinks about the dinner he's about to sit through, the empty chair accusing across the table, and mentally shrugs. He breaks the seal and tips the bottle back.

Johnny's early morning soccer time completely falls apart. He goes in like usual, but he can't focus, can't clear his head. He tries juggling the ball and ends up dropping it after only a minute or two every time.

Finally, in a rage, he holds the ball out like a football punter and kicks it as hard as he can. It arcs high through the dawn sky and lands on the school roof, and great. Another thing he'll have to try to explain. After staring futilely at the roof for a few seconds, Johnny curses and flops back on the dewy, cold grass. He stares at the sky until the school buses arrive in the distance.

Daniel never shows up.

Daniel returns to practice and it's almost like nothing happened, except he's a little slower and sometimes he winces if he twists the

wrong way. And he doesn't speak to Johnny anymore: no more trash talk during drills or debating a game play during the water break. He barely even looks at him unless he's directing a pass, and he never meets his eyes. He basically acts like Johnny doesn't exist, and it pisses him off.

Bobby tries talking to him first thing in the locker room the day after the dojo deal goes down, tries explaining the mistake and apologizing, but Daniel won't even give *him* the time of day. So he's grudge-holding little punk, big surprise. As long as they can still function on the field, Johnny tells himself it doesn't matter and he shouldn't care.

It's better this way. Daniel not talking to him means Johnny doesn't risk slipping up and revealing anything. No more sidelong grins means he won't flush. No more cocky joking means he won't try to cuff the other boy and get too close, linger too long.

So Daniel really hates him now, fine; guy's dead meat in six weeks anyway. Even if Bobby got through and persuaded Daniel that the beating was a misunderstanding, what good would it do? Johnny's not going to hold back in the tournament.

And anyway, afterwards, some part of Johnny really believes all this gay shit will reveal itself to have been some form of temporary insanity.

Chapter 15

Their one overnight away game of the season against Santa Barbara is usually a lot of fun: a three-hour bus drive followed by the team taking over a motel on the outskirts of the city; figuring out how to duck the parent chaperones and Coach to party late into the night, and then the early Saturday morning game to work off the hangovers.

Johnny always looks forward to it, but this year he can't fully enjoy the raucous ride because there's a lonesome dark head slumped against a window near the front of the bus just behind Coach's seat. Johnny lets the other guys thump his shoulder and balance a radio on the edge of his seat. He tries to focus on the music and not how his eye wants to keep drifting forward.

His misgivings grow as they get to the motel. They all pile out of the bus and crowd the parking lot, jostling each other and talking loud about going to the beach while Coach gives out the room keys and assignments. Somehow Johnny has forgotten he always does the rooms in alphabetical order by last name, and the announcement takes him like a sucker punch.

He and LaRusso step forward from opposite sides of the group at the same time, imploring and desperate.

“Uh, Coach—”

“Look, can we trade—”

Coach Reeve's eyes lift from his clipboard and they both fall silent. “You boys really want to test me after the past couple weeks?” he asks. His mustache is practically bristling with impatience.

“...Nope.”

“We're good.”

They look at each other for the first time in days: Daniel wary and suspicious and Johnny trying to hide the way his pulse started racing the moment he heard Coach call out *Lawrence, LaRusso.* He never really thought about how their names sounded right next to each other. It's such a stupid detail to get hung up on.

“Guess I'll be sleeping with one eye open tonight,” mutters Daniel.

And Johnny knows he's talking about getting beat up, but it still brushes too close to his own nightmare of losing control of this horrible thing growing inside him.

“Our senseis said no fighting before the tournament,” he reminds him stiffly. If nothing else, he can wave that in the other boy's face as proof of good intentions.

“Oh, a *truce*?” Daniel starts walking backwards. He tosses the key in the air and catches it. “Where have I heard that before?”

Then he turns around and heads into the motel. For a guy supposedly worried about getting hurt, he sure puts zero effort into not baiting Johnny.

He thinks: so I'll avoid the room, easy. Sleep on Bobby's floor? No, that would raise too many questions. Or would it? Everyone knows he and Daniel hate each other. But it would look like *he*'s backing down like a pussy. He could try to kick Daniel out of the room, but that might attract Coach's attention.

In the end, Johnny has no choice but to throw his duffle over his shoulder, put his head down and follow Daniel to the room.

Chapter 16

“Do you care which bed?” asks Daniel, and then he throws his bag on the one by the window without waiting for him to answer. Dick.

“You better not snore,” says Johnny, lingering just inside the room. Everything in him is saying to get out now, go no further. The moment the door shut behind them, his adrenaline spiked like it does in a karate match; for the first time in his life he wants to choose flight instead of fight. He can barely look at him standing next to a bed.

Daniel snorts and shakes his head. He stares out the window like the freeway is the most fascinating sight in the world and says conversationally, “I'd ask what your problem is, but I already know.”

“Oh, what do you know?” Thinking: you have no fucking clue.

Daniel waits another second and then turns around, challenge all over his face. He braces his hands on his hips and says, “Your problem is the weird gay crush you have on me.”

The strap of Johnny's bag slips from suddenly nerveless fingers and the duffle lands on the floor with a dull noise.

“What the fuck did you just say,” he says, hoarse.

The other boy nods. “You heard me – and I heard you, that night on the beach. Your drunk ass was shouting from like two feet away, what did you expect?”

He isn't sure how his body can feel so cold when his face is flaming.

Daniel continues, somehow managing to look both angry and smug, “And I gotta tell you, man, once you know what to look for, you're really obvious about it. You're like a seventh grader or something.”

Johnny needs to say something – denial would be good! But he only continues to stare in horror. Then he realizes he's staring and averts his gaze. But what's the point? His nightmare has come true and the other boy already knows.

“I wasn't going to say anything,” continues the prick, relentless, “but then you had to sick your goons on me.”

“I had nothing to do with that,” he says, because that, at least, he has a response to.

“Right, that'd be why Dutch said *this is from Johnny* right before he punched me in the kidney.”

Johnny's hands clench into fists. “You want a follow-up, man, keep talking.”

“Ah, a threat. There we go. Right on schedule.” Daniel shakes his head, mouth curling. “Be more of a cliché. I dare you.”

And well, since he's been invited—

Johnny takes two steps forward and Daniel tenses, hands coming up. His stance is still a joke.

“Go ahead,” says Daniel, fear leaking through the bravado. “Good luck explaining it to Coach, though.”

“Everything you just said is bullshit,” says Johnny, voice shaking in rage. “And if you dare repeat it to anyone – *anyone*. I swear I'll—”

Daniel searches his face, fear fading. After a moment he drops his hands and straightens. Great, so Johnny can't even be properly intimidating anymore, god.

“I wouldn't say anything,” he says quietly. “I wasn't gonna. I just want you to leave me alone.”

“What do you think I've been trying to do?” he demands.

Daniel's expression turns incredulous. “When? It's like everywhere I turn, there you are, with your stupid karate jacket and stupid bike—”

“Everywhere *you* turn?” Johnny puts his finger up. “I was here first, you're the one butting in here. First Ali, and then my soccer team. Now I can't even go to the dojo without you somehow popping up there too.”

“And you got my mother talking about what a *nice young man* you are, and I can't even tell her you're the one responsible for me getting beat up, because she actually likes your mom—”

“Yeah, well, my mom likes her too,” he says angrily.

Daniel shakes head. “You know, for a very brief moment there, I

thought you were cool?"

"I am cool," says Johnny because that, if nothing else, remains true.

Daniel shuts his eyes and hangs his head. Johnny looks at the messy parting of his hair and feels his throat tighten.

A rapid fire series of slaps hit the hotel door, making them both jump.

"Yo, Johnny," calls Tommy from the other side. "Pizza time!"

Chapter 17

Much, much later in the night, Johnny levers himself off the floor between Jim and Bobby's beds, blinks at their sleeping forms, and mutters a thick-tongued curse. It's past two in the morning. He is very drunk.

It takes him two attempts to stand and staggering to the door is a trial, but once he's out in the hallway, it's a clean shot down to his own room. Theoretically. The hallway is very long and very bright – it's never night time in a hotel hallway – and the carpet has some bizarre psycho pattern he hadn't noticed before. Like lightning going through a bunch of Doritos or something.

Once facing the door with the right number, he realizes he doesn't have the room key and panic sets in. He's stranded out in the hallway in easy sight of a chaperone or Coach, not good, not good.

He tries the door handle just in case; nope. Locked. He knocks and hisses, “LaRusso!” Knocks again. “LaRusso!” He switches from knocking to drumming on the door with his palms: rat-a-tat-tat. “Daniel, open the door.”

After an eternity, the door swings open and bleary-eyed Daniel stares up at him. He's wearing boxers and nothing else, and looks kinda pissy.

“Seriously?” says Daniel.

A sound from down the hall: a door? Johnny looks wildly around. He says, “Lemme in, man, quick,” and charges forward without waiting.

Daniel stumbles back into the coat hangers and curses and Johnny gets the door shut.

“You stepped on my foot, you ass.”

“Shh,” says Johnny urgently, waving a hand behind him without looking. They both listen as steps approach down the hall outside. A shadow pauses, visible from the crack below the door. Johnny holds his breath, not daring to move a muscle.

Eventually the shadow passes on. The footsteps recede again. They both let out a sigh.

“Don't know why I'm so relieved, serve you right if you got caught hammered night before a game,” says Daniel, straightening up. In the air-conditioned room, his nipples are hard; they're a dark brown and Johnny wishes he didn't notice this.

Daniel shakes his head and shuffles around him, heading back to his bed. But he just sits on it, watching dark-eyed from across the room as Johnny leans back against the wall and tries to get his shoes off.

“You're gonna be useless tomorrow,” says Daniel. “I'm gonna have to carry the team on my back, what else is new.”

“I,” says Johnny, slapping at the light switch next to the bathroom, “could out play you blindfold and on one leg.”

He unzips and pisses, groaning with how good it feels. He kicks off his jeans and rockets back into the room.

“How do you kick with only one leg?” Daniel wants to know. Then his eyes widen in alarm because Johnny gestures, like *I'll show you* and—“Whoa, whoa.” Suddenly he's across the room and grabbing Johnny's shoulders, steadying him. He looks annoyed, and his nipples are very brown. “Why don't you lie down before you brain yourself, idiot.”

He pushes him to his bed and Johnny lands heavily on the mattress, bouncing a little.

“Don't throw up,” orders Daniel, crossing his arms. Hiding the nipples. “You think you're going to throw up, go do it in the hallway.”

Johnny says, “I'm not going to throw up. I'm not a girl. I can handle alcohol.”

Daniel doesn't look like he believes him. Whatever. Johnny falls onto his back and stares at the spinning ceiling. Daniel shuts off the bathroom light and walks back to his own bed.

He waits until the other boy is lying down again, tossing and turning on the lumpy hotel mattress, and then he says into the darkness, “You're pretty and I hate you.”

Daniel sits up straight. He says, sounding deeply offended, “I am not *pretty*. I am ruggedly handsome and you are so incredibly gay.”

Maybe Johnny is going to throw up. He clenches his abdomen and presses his teeth together tightly until the feeling passes.

“Like, I don't blame you for wanting me,” continues Daniel, “I'm pretty great, a real catch—”

“I hate you so much,” he grits out.

“You wish that were true.”

Johnny says nothing. He has taken a vow of silence and is never going to say another word so long as he lives.

“Like, I bet you wish you were in this bed with me.”

Johnny gropes behind him for a pillow and presses it over his face. Can he suffocate himself? He's a hard worker, he's willing to put in the effort and try.

“I bet you want to fucking cuddle. Bet you want to watch me sleep and wake me up in the morning for breakfast in bed and then suck my dick.”

The suffocation isn't working, so Johnny switches tactics; he rises up and whips the pillow at the other bed as hard as he can. It hits Daniel in the face with a satisfying *whumph*.

“If you don't shut up, I'll come over there and make you,” says Johnny. “Just keep testing me, man. Go ahead.”

They glare at each other, and Johnny watches the struggle play itself out across Daniel's face. Can he do it? Can the other boy back down and shut the fuck up? The world waits with bated breath.

“...Bet you want to do it with a kiss,” says Daniel and scrambles backwards as Johnny lunges madly for him.

Chapter 18

Johnny's real drunk but Daniel's wily, which is the only reason it's even close to a fair fight. They roll over three or four times, twisting in the bedspread and pulling the bottom sheet clear off the mattress. Daniel locks his arm between them to fend him off, so Johnny sits on him and tries to smother his face with a pillow. It works a lot better when you're doing it to someone else, turns out.

Daniel yells something into the pillow, the words coming through muffled, indistinct.

Johnny lifts the pillow fractionally. “What was that?” he inquires.

Daniel's flushed from all the shouting and asphyxiation, but he somehow still has breath to speak. Maybe he has a third lung, Johnny thinks.

“I said, get off, moron, I can't feel my legs. You weigh a ton.”

Just for that, Johnny jumps a little and lands hard. Daniel makes a low sound.

“That's all muscle, LaRusso,” he says.

Daniel rolls his eyes. “You're such a freak.”

He presses the other boy into the mattress. “Gonna stop baiting me?”

“I don't know, *Lawrence*, you gonna get off me or get off on me?”

They both pause, faces going red. It's a lot stranger when Daniel says something like that while under him. Johnny takes stock of the situation: their rucked up boxers, thighs pressed together; Daniel's heaving chest and the dark spill of his hair against the bare mattress.

“Get off me, man,” Daniel says hurriedly and yeah, good idea. Johnny rolls off him quickly and perches on the side of the bed. He clears his throat. He doesn't look down to his lap, thinking it's probably better not to direct any attention to it.

After a very tense silence that lasts about a minute, Daniel gets up and goes over to the other bed.

“What are you doing?” Johnny says, and his voice goes so high it

actually cracks for the first time in like, two years.

Daniel gestures. “You fucked my bed up, look at it.”

“*We* fucked it up, you mean.” And that sounds weird, why does every other thing out of their mouths sound so weird tonight. “Anyway, that's your loss. You chose this bed, you gotta lie in it.”

Daniel puts his pillow down and fluffs it ostentatiously. “Nope.” He gets in the bed and puts his back to Johnny, like he can just decide to end this whenever, call it a night and Johnny'll let him.

He spends about thirty seconds fuming and looking down at the messy bed – damn, they actually tore the sheet – before deciding, fuck this.

Daniel startles up again the moment Johnny's weight hits the bed. “Hey, hey! What're you doing?”

“Oh, grow up. It's a damn queen mattress.” Despite his own words, he is buzzing with nerves. He edges as close to the far side as he can without actually falling off.

“Queen mattress for a queen,” mutters Daniel, and lies back down.

Johnny grits his teeth. “I will actually kill you.”

“Whatever. Do it tomorrow after the game? We have to get up in like, three hours.”

Three hours. Johnny might actually die.

He watches Daniel's shoulders lose some of their tension and how the line of his spine softens and figures that means he's falling asleep. And before he knows it, Johnny does too.

Chapter 19

Next thing he knows, the lights in the room are on and Daniel's saying, “Got you breakfast,” and something small and hard as a rock hits Johnny in the eye. He flinches and flails and falls off the bed.

“Uh, sorry,” says Daniel, not sounding particularly sorry at all.

Johnny reaches a shaky hand up to the bed and drags himself up onto his knees. He squints at the bedside clock, which stubbornly reads 6:12 AM, and then looks at the thing that hit him. He lifts his gaze to Daniel, who is already dressed in his jersey and standing chewing a granola bar.

“You threw a Red Delicious at my head,” he says.

Daniel eyes him. “You don't look so good.”

Johnny thinks there is a chance he might still be a little drunk, because he's pretty sure if he'd already transitioned into the hangover stage, he'd be freaking out about the previous day a lot more. Instead, the world feels unreal, like nothing counts. Part of him seriously suspects he could probably jump out the window and fly right now.

Instead, he picks up the apple. “How come you get a granola bar and I get an apple that tastes like ass?”

He shrugs. “Breakfast bar's still open. Coach wants us out of here in fifteen though, so if you want something else, you better hurry.”

“Can't you go? I need to take a shower.” He pinches the collar of his shirt and smells himself and yeah, that's really not an option.

“I got you one breakfast already, now you want two?”

Johnny takes a breath and pushes up to standing. He waits for his vision to return from its dehydration blackout and says, “You only grabbed that apple because it was the hardest projectile you could find.”

His vision returns to Daniel smirking slightly around his granola. The other boy meets his eyes and shrugs a little.

And this is – this is fine. Maybe this is fine? Maybe it's possible for Daniel to know about this stupid crush situation and not use it to ruin

Johnny's life. Apparently what he wants to do instead is take all his disgust and channel it into revenge hazing. That's so... him.

Johnny walks past him to the bathroom, dragging his shirt over his head. Daniel turns in place, disgustingly bright-eyed and attentive, and keeps eating. “Man, how the hell are you going to play in two hours?”

He turns, hand on the door knob to the bathroom and says, “Maybe this'll give me an edge, ever think of that?”

It does *not* give Johnny an edge.

“Lawrence, what the hell are you doing?” bellows Coach from the sideline. He's jumping in place and tearing at his hair. “Do you see – *can* you see? Have you gone blind?”

Santa fucking Barbara. Coach gets like this every year. Bobby says it has something to do with the other team's coach and an old rivalry from their schooldays. It was kind of pathetic.

Daniel jogs over to him, dark eyes running all over Johnny's wheezing form. “So uh, you look like shit, and you're playing even worse.”

“I noticed,” gasps Johnny, who is wondering if it would count as offside if his vomit lands further up the field than the ball. “This is all your fault.” Because it *is*. Johnny would never have gotten so drunk if it hadn't been for LaRusso's fucking mind games. You find out a guy's gay, you either beat him up or never speak to him again, what the hell.

Daniel scraped his hair back from his forehead. “I am shocked you feel that way. Johnny Lawrence, ducking responsibility for his own actions, who'd a thunk.”

“What are you two doing out there, having fucking tea time?” shouts Coach. Johnny straightens and looks over to see he's gone an alarming shade of purple. “No, no,” he says to the approaching ref, “I will not mind my language, do you see this shit—”

Which is how Coach Reeve ends up getting carded and spending the rest of the game waiting on the bus in the parking lot down the street from the field.

Somehow they end up winning; Parker, of all people, gets a penalty kick in the second half. Johnny doesn't vomit and doesn't pass out. It's not exactly the inspirational late-season win of anyone's dreams, but he'll take it.

Chapter 20

And so begins one of the most tense and bizarre periods of Johnny's life.

Daniel isn't around much outside of school and practice – whatever the old man has him doing to train for the tournament, it takes up a lot of time. Johnny hears secondhand about Ali mentioning it, half-regretful. Secondhand, because she's back to not talking to him. No one believes Johnny wasn't behind the attack.

When Daniel is around, he makes Johnny's life a living hell.

Johnny can't look at him without thinking *he knows* and it's not just the lingering sick panic doing it; Daniel never meets Johnny's eyes without giving some sign or reminder, a knowing look or grin. One time, a bounce of the eyebrows. He's enjoying himself and Johnny wants to kill him.

He comes up to Johnny sometimes in the hallways when he's alone and talks at him, like Johnny turning into some kind of a fag means he suddenly wants to hear LaRusso's opinions on the hockey draft or the history of karate.

“Oh my god,” says Johnny at one point, slamming his locker and turning around. “Shut up? Shut up. Why can't you leave me alone?”

Daniel puts his hand up on the wall and leans, like Johnny is some chick down at the Golf N Stuff he's cruising. He gives him a long look and says smugly, “You don't actually want me to leave you alone.”

What a freak. Johnny can only respond by turning around and walking away.

Soccer practice is the worst of it, because after Santa Barbara, Coach decides the team's playoff chances rest on Johnny and Daniel working together and the only way through is something he calls exposure therapy.

“What's that mean?” asks Johnny: heart already sinking. Ten feet away, Bobby is wincing at him sympathetically. Dutch is sniggering.

“If you're lucky, it won't involve a Get Along Shirt,” says Coach, before ordering the two of them to do ten laps of the field.

“I don't understand why I'm being punished here,” pants Daniel, when Johnny laps him. “I mean – *you* were the hungover disaster that day.”

“Yeah, and you were so busy gloating about it, you forgot to play.”

Coach pairs them for every drill. He makes them go together when Daniel needs ice for his ankle. He even makes them take water breaks together. And the whole time, Daniel keeps glancing at him, like he's waiting for Johnny to fall on his knees and pant like a horny cartoon dog or something.

“So,” he says, while they're doing cool down stretches one afternoon. “In your well-considered opinion, what's my best feature?”

Johnny stares into the middle distance and says nothing.

“My sculpted jawline? My eyes? It's my eyes, isn't it.”

Johnny wonders what Coach would say if he announced he is quitting soccer a couple weeks before the end of the regular season.

Then, inevitably, Daniel finally takes things too far. He doesn't respect the neutral zone; he tries messing with Johnny in the showers one day after practice.

Chapter 21

They're the last ones inside because they've been on equipment duty all week. Johnny's friends have all left for the dojo, and Coach locked up his office ten minutes previous. It's just Johnny, his crisis, and Daniel's off-key whistling.

He's minding his own business: head down, letting the water plaster his hair to his head, determinedly ignoring Daniel on the far side of the showers. He's so determined, in fact, he doesn't notice when the other shower turns off.

Then Daniel says behind him, “Careful, spend too long in here, people might get the wrong idea,” and he snaps his towel at Johnny's ass.

It's nothing a dozen guys haven't done to him before, but that was always in the locker room. The showers are different. Johnny jolts forward, more in shock than anything, and catches himself against the tiled wall. He stares after the other boy, who is already wrapping his slim hips in the offending towel and leaving the room.

Johnny's jaw clenches. A deadly calm descends. He turns off the shower and stalks after Daniel.

Daniel doesn't realize he's behind him until the last second. His eyes widen but it's too late for him to do anything but try to catch himself as Johnny takes hold of his shoulders and shoves him hard against the locker room wall.

“Whoa, hey – you are *naked*,” says Daniel, eyes flying up and away.

“Noticed that, did you,” says Johnny, stepping in close so the other boy has to raise his chin to meet his eyes. There are a hundred different ways to get the point across that you're bigger than someone, and Johnny knows all of them. And Daniel has somehow forgotten that.

“You are going to step messing with me,” he says.

His eyes flash. “Or what?”

“Or I'm going to say, fuck waiting until December, fuck the tournament, fuck—”

“Me? Fuck me?” Daniel is breathing fast, and Johnny can feel his

heart pounding below his clenched fist. He looks half-terrified but when has that ever stopped him. “That's what you want, isn't it? And you can't handle it. Excuse me for finding that kinda funny.”

The water dripping from his hair feels cold on the back of his neck.

“Yeah, you think it's hilarious. I got that. And it is funny. Imagine you thinking just because I want,” and he can't say it, so he does what he's always done and retreats into the physical; he reaches down and cups Daniel's dick through the towel. The other boy jumps, and his face flushes a brilliant red. “This, because I want this, you think that means I actually like you.” He lets out a shaky laugh. “That *is* funny.”

Daniel stares up at him, all humor gone from his expression.

In Johnny's hand, his dick twitches. Johnny knows with a kind of grim certainty he's going to spend the rest of the night thinking about it.

He swallows and steps back. He's half hard but he doesn't bother trying to cover up; what's the point, when he's apparently nothing but exposed to LaRusso all the time anyway.

Daniel doesn't move. He's still got his shoulders back against the wall like he's being pinned by invisible hands.

“So don't think I'm going to go easy on you in the tournament because of a stupid crush,” says Johnny, and that's what finally gets the other boy to roll off the wall and turn away.

Chapter 22

Sensei says: always anticipate the attack.

Daniel stops baiting him. He stops with the smirks, stops flitting around him like a goddamn chattering bird. Instead, he settles back and watches Johnny. He watches him all the time, and it's a whole new variety of maddening.

In history class, Johnny sits in the back of the classroom, chair up on two legs, and generally zones out for fifty minutes. Now he can't even do that, because Daniel's two rows over and three chairs down and he keeps staring at him.

At lunch in the cafeteria, Dutch says, “What's LaRusso up to now?” And when Johnny looks up, Daniel's across the room next to Ali and just looking away.

At practice, Daniel doesn't even look at the ball when he moves in for the tackle; his glare feels like a physical presence, like having a third player between them. Johnny can't resist throwing an elbow when the other boy's foot slides between his for the ball. Coach blows his whistle and makes them both do burpees until neither can stand.

Coach comes to stand over their prone bodies, his hands on his hips. He says, “You *will* get along, you *will* work together, and we will get into the playoffs. It's all three or nothing, boys.”

And when Johnny turns his head against the grass, looking away from the overcast winter sky, Daniel's still watching him.

Sensei says: use every tool at your disposal.

Johnny's been stuffed into a suit jacket and garroted with a tie and then trotted around the dance floor of the country club. The only person there close to his age is Ali and she won't even look at him.

Ali's mother winks at him and murmurs something about a plan to help them along, and he tries with desperate awkwardness to tell her *no really, that's not necessary—*

Anyway, they end up dancing, arms stiff around each other, faces frozen in polite grimaces.

“Can you relax?” he says through his teeth; Ali's mom keeps sneaking glances at them. God, this is embarrassing. “What happened to our truce?”

Ali looks up at him in disbelief. “You know what happened.”

“I had nothing to do with that. Not that he didn't have it coming.”

And that was a mistake, he shouldn't have said that. Her expression shuts down. They turn in place for a few more minutes, neither speaking. Once, this would've been fun; they would've been joking about the scene, the stiff music and stuffy clothing. Once, they would've been allies here.

Johnny looks up and sees Daniel's face in the doorway of the kitchen, and his body goes hot and cold all over in quick succession.

This'll fucking show him, thinks Johnny. His arms tighten around Ali and he ducks in for a kiss, keeping his eyes on Daniel's as he covers her mouth with his. He doesn't blink or break eye contact and after a second, the other boy's face twists and he turns away.

Then Ali shoves him back and makes a huge scene. Daniel ends up on his ass with spaghetti all down his front and Johnny ends up with a decent right hook to the mouth. It's a draw, basically.

Sensei says, never forget who the enemy is.

At night, lying on his back with his eyes closed doesn't feel as private as it should. He feels laid bare, raw, like the whole world can see in through his window and skull to the thoughts that fester inside: images of Daniel shirtless, how the smooth flex of his biceps would look if he pulled Johnny in instead of pushing him away. How that

stupid smart mouth would feel curving under his lips.

Johnny thinks these things when he's not being properly vigilant. He thinks them and his hands ball into fists and he punches the mattress until the springs protest.

Chapter 23

And somehow throughout all of this, Mrs. LaRusso and his mom keep making dinner plans together. The two women know each other well enough by now that Lucille feels comfortable inviting them over to the South Seas.

“You know, Mom, I'm really busy,” he tries saying that morning. He swings his arms. “Finals are coming up in a couple weeks, and between soccer and the tournament—”

Laura shakes her head. “Johnny, you can't skip out on this dinner. It'll look like you think we're too good for them.”

“Oh, c'mon, they're not gonna think that,” he says a little pathetically: heart sinking, because that is exactly what they'll think. “I mean, you told her about all the dumps we used to live in, didn't you?”

Laura just looks at him. She doesn't even frown or anything. She doesn't need to; after a couple seconds he hangs his head and groans.

She ruffles his hair in passing. “It won't be so bad – Daniel will be there! You two are good friends now, right?”

“No water is better than some of the alternatives,” laughs Laura, walking arm-in-arm with Lucille past the pool. “This place we lived in when Johnny was eight, I swear there was something growing on the surface of the pool. I had the worst time getting him to leave it alone, he kept wanting to drag his fingers through it and try a taste...”

Johnny and Daniel square off at the bottom of the stairs.

“You know, I could be training right now,” says Daniel.

“Probably should be, if you think you have a hope of making it past the first round,” says Johnny.

They narrow their eyes at each other.

“Honey,” calls Lucille; they both clear their expression and look up the stairwell at their mothers. “Why don't you show Johnny your room?”

“Ma, we're seventeen, not seven,” says Daniel, sounding deeply aggrieved. Johnny smirks at him. “I don't need to show off my cool toys or whatever.”

She sounds unimpressed and therefore extremely like her son as she replies, “Well, dinner's going to be a while. What you do with your time is up to you.”

The two women disappear into one of the apartments, taking their laughter with them. Daniel wraps a hand around the stair railing. He cocks his mouth and looks around the pool area. Johnny shoves his hands in his pockets and tries not to fidget or stare.

Finally, Daniel sighs. “Want to go to my room?”

Johnny would rather crawl naked through a pit of venomous snakes. “Sure.”

Daniel's room is small and a total pig sty. It's almost a relief to know the other boy doesn't fold his laundry or put away his shinguards. His bed is unmade, a blue plaid blanket barely hanging on for dear life at the end of the mattress. He has only two posters up on his walls: one for the New Jersey Devils (hockey, who the fuck watches *hockey*?) and the other of Han Solo.

Johnny looks away from the second poster and mutters, “Luke's cooler.”

Daniel's expression twists. “Who the hell picks Luke over Han?”

“Luke's the *hero* of the story. Han's a born loser who blames all his problems on other people.”

“Luke's story is all about himself,” argues Daniel. “Han's is about like, learning to step up for others.”

They shake their heads at each other.

“How long does it take to cook lasagna?” asks Johnny a little later. The room is feeling smaller by the second.

“An hour.”

“How long's it been?”

“Twenty minutes.”

Johnny's head falls back against the wall.

“Hey, uh. You ever hear of like, balance?” asks Daniel.

“Duh,” he says. “I've been able to do a handstand since I was like, five.”

“That's not—”

Johnny straightens out of his slouch. “Don't believe me? I'll show you.”

“Not that kind – you know what? Fine.” Daniel flaps his arms. “Show you me your freaking handstand, you weirdo.”

Daniel's upside-down face doesn't look particularly impressed when Johnny fluidly kicks into it, but whatever. He's the one who brought it up in the first place.

“Can do this forever,” grunts Johnny, hands flexing against the floor.

Daniel flops onto his bed and puts his elbows on his knees. “All the blood in your body is rushing to your head right now. I give you five minutes before you pass out.”

“That a bet?” he asks, adjusting his stance.

“Sure, yeah. It's a bet.”

“What do I get if I win?” He says it without thinking and isn't aiming for anything in particular, but the sudden hesitancy on Daniel's face makes him realize how it might have sounded. Before he can rush on and say something, *anything*, Daniel says:

“You hold that for five minutes without falling or passing out, and I'll let you kiss me.”

Chapter 24

Johnny wobbles and falls immediately, his legs knocking into a stack of books on the way down.

“Whoop, guess that's that,” says Daniel blandly. “Damn, I didn't call what I'd get if you couldn't do it.”

“What. What the fuck did you just say?” wheezes Johnny from his crumpled position on the floor. He hauls himself up and tries to recover his composure. “And who says I even want to kiss you anymore?”

In his head, it's running like a shock jock's radio sound effect: I'll let you kiss me. I'll let you kiss me. He's going to have a heart attack at seventeen, and it's going to be Daniel LaRusso's fault.

“Seriously, man?” And when Johnny scowls at him, his chin lands in his hand and he says, sounding almost bored, “I told you, you're really obvious.”

“Stop saying that,” he snaps, anxiety spiking through his veins like he injected it with a needle. He runs a hand over his hair, straightening it. Heat from his cheeks beat out against his palm like a roaring furnace.

“Y'know, Ali thought you were jealous over her?” It's like he always knows exactly what to say to rattle Johnny the worst. Daniel rocks slightly on the edge of his bed, hands folding together. He looks at Johnny almost resentfully. “Do you know how weird that felt, knowing the truth?”

“You don't know the truth, not even close.” Johnny scoots so he's got his back against the wall. He needs the firm support.

“Oh no?” Daniel leans so far forward he's almost off the bed. “You macking on her while staring at me? You think I don't know what was going through your head?”

“Maybe I was just trying to piss you off, ever think of that?”

“Well, you succeeded.”

“Good.” Johnny takes a cautious breath, shoulders relaxing. This feels like safer territory.

“So?” says Daniel, not sounding at all like he got the message about the safer territory. In fact, he sounds almost like he's spinning himself up into a proper tantrum. What is his *deal*.

“So... what?” And he almost flinches as Daniel crouches on the floor five feet away. This stupid bedroom is the size of a shoe box.

“So, don't you want to just get it over with?” says Daniel aggressively. “Like we do this, you realize it's not like you thought and get over this stupid crush. Then maybe we can finish the season without killing each other.”

“Do what?” He's so lost.

Daniel's expression firms, determined. “I'm gonna kiss you.”

He starts to crab walk towards him and Johnny presses hard into the wall. “You're fucking crazy, stay away from me.”

But Daniel doesn't stop coming. Johnny slides along the wall, socked feet scrabbling for purchase. He turns and lunges up for the doorknob and Daniel jumps on his back, arms twisting around him like an angry squid's tentacles, trying to force him to turn over. Johnny kicks the wall and they thump into the door and land back on the floor.

“Would you stop being a baby—”

“Jesus Christ.” Johnny reaches up to pry his fingers off his neck. His lungs feel like they're going to burst, he hasn't breathed in he doesn't know how long.

“—and fucking. *Take it.*” Daniel gets a hot hand on his face and starts forcing his head around and then there's a knock and Lucille is saying:

“Daniel? Johnny? Dinner's ready.”

Chapter 25

The table is quiet but for the faint tinkling and scrape of forks. Johnny glances up once and sees his mom watching him, looking faintly puzzled. A lump forms in his throat and he clears it, and then since he's cleared it and everyone is looking at him, he says:

“This is uh, really great lasagna, Mrs. LaRusso.”

Lucille smiles at him. “Thank you, Johnny.”

“Honey,” says Laura reaching over to turn his head into the light. “Is that... rug burn on your cheek? What on earth were you two doing in that room?”

Johnny's eyes crash into Daniel's in a complete panic and the other boy says quickly, “Karate. We were – doing karate.”

“Oh, I didn't know you did karate as well, Daniel. Did you start going over to Cobra Kai?”

“We have this lovely neighbor, Mr. Miyagi,” says Lucille, hand waving. “He's sort of taken Daniel under his wing.”

“Yeah, he's great. He's – teaching me a lot.” Daniel doesn't look up from his plate as he says it. His brow pinches and for a moment he almost looks guilty. He glances up at Johnny, who immediately looks away.

The rest of the dinner passes thankfully quickly, and then Johnny's making his excuses and escaping down to where his bike is parked out on the street.

“Hey Johnny, wait up a second—” calls Daniel from the gate of the apartment. Johnny doesn't jump because he isn't a wuss, but he does walk a little faster because he isn't an idiot. “No, hang on, man. C'mon, I just want to talk.”

What a shock, Daniel LaRusso wants to talk. Johnny reaches his bike and hefts his helmet. Hearing the tell-tale crunch of gravel behind him, he hurriedly round the bike so its bulk is between them.

Daniel looks exasperated. “Seriously, you look like I'm trying to mug you.”

“Forty minutes ago you jumped me, so it's not much of a stretch.”

He hesitates. “I know, and – look, I'm sorry, alright? I got kind of carried away.”

“You think?”

“You just make me a little crazy sometimes. I stop thinking and take things too far. You must know what that's like.”

“Don't know what you're talking about,” says Johnny stiffly.

Daniel puts a hand on his hip and gives him a look. “Can you, for once, meet me halfway here?”

“Okay, fine,” he snaps. “I get that. I – do that, too. Sometimes, maybe.”

“Thank you.” Daniel rolls his eyes. He looks around the darkened street, with its trash-covered sidewalk and broken streetlights. He glances over his shoulder to the empty lot beside the apartment building and then cuts his eyes back to Johnny. “Hey, look – you want to maybe kick around a ball or something? Play some one-on-one again? I'm all wired and Mr. Miyagi's gone out to his other place for the night.”

It's a bad idea. It's a very bad idea. A voice in Johnny's head says it's a trap – but for once, Daniel isn't glaring at him or sneering. He's just looking back at Johnny, expression open and clear. Waiting.

Johnny sets the helmet back down on the bike. “Yeah, okay.”

Chapter 26

Daniel nudges the ball past a thick patch of crabgrass, and Johnny watches him warily: half for the moves he's making with the ball, half in case he makes a move for him.

Daniel glances up and meets his eyes. Something in his expression checks itself for a moment, but then it seems like he deliberately relaxes. He kicks the ball and Johnny moves to block it.

“Heard Ali popped you real good,” says Daniel casually. He falls back a step, waiting for Johnny to do something.

“Yeah,” he says, because she did. He aims to match the other boy's tone. He can be careful too. “But who do you think taught her that right hook? So really, I still basically won.”

Daniel laughs slightly and shakes his head, and Johnny bites back a grin. He feints and dribbles past him and kicks the ball between the two beer cans (half-crumpled Heineken tall boys this time, bright green even in the dark, and seriously, who hung out back here when the two of them weren't engaged in wartime negotiations via soccer).

“How'd getting a lapful of hot spaghetti feel, anyway?” he asks, because if they were going to trade jokes about things that hadn't been funny at the time – well, fair game.

Daniel flaps a hand, dismissive. “Eh, kinda serves me right, wearing white in the kitchen.” And there is something about the easy way he says it, the careless grin he sends Johnny. It didn't occur to him that Daniel could loosen up enough to laugh at himself, and it feels – good.

They kick the ball around until it's almost midnight. Daniel doesn't try anything and by the end, Johnny mostly relaxes. It feels so normal, the relief is almost painful. He hadn't been sure he could still be normal.

Bobby waits for Jim to move past to the showers and then he dumps his sports bag on the floor and sits next to Johnny on the bench. He's got that cautious look on his face that he has already started to associate with uncomfortable probing questions of the LaRusso

variety; he ignores the look and continues tightening the studs on his cleats.

“So,” says Bobby after a moment. “Things seemed – better today. Don't think Coach knew what to make of it.”

Coach actually called out *good job, boys* that afternoon and it was hard to say who was more shocked, he or Johnny and Daniel.

“Yeah,” he says. He frowns at the small threading of a stud, wondering why he can't get it to go in straight. Did he gut mud in the hole again? He tilts the cleat into the light, trying to see.

“Given that we thought we were looking at a murder-suicide before the last game—”

“Who's we?” Johnny asks, looking up. Bobby raises his eyebrows and glances around the locker room. “Oh, c'mon. It wasn't that bad.”

“Dutch was trying to arrange a death pool,” the other boy says flatly.

Johnny pauses. “What were my odds?”

“Not the point.” Johnny waits and Bobby sighs. “Everyone's money was going to be on you. Except Parker, he thought Daniel was too sneaky to lose.”

Fucking Parker. Johnny glares across to the other bench. Parker, in the middle of tying his shoelaces, gives him a baffled look. He messes up his knot and hastily pulls on the laces to start again.

“What I want to know,” says Bobby, voice pitched to recapture Johnny's wandering attention, “is whether this time the peace is going to last.”

He momentarily gives up on the cleat and shoves it into the duffle at his feet. He says, “Bobby, LaRusso and I both want to win the next game, and neither of us want Coach Reeve to murder us in the parking lot in front of our mothers. We're cool. We figured it out.” And maybe that last part was him being overly optimistic, but hey, making it to eighteen with his sanity intact wasn't such a crazy goal, was it?

“And the tournament?” says Bobby, following him up as Johnny stood.

He looks over to where Daniel is coming out of the showers and then

back at his friend. “I'm not worried about the tournament. It's not like he's going to make it more than a couple rounds, anyway, right?”

Chapter 27

At their last practice of the regular season, Coach blows his whistle and calls while waving an arm overhead, “Alright, boys. Everyone gather – look, sit down and shut up, will you.”

They all stop talking and wander over to kneel on the grass. Daniel flops down next to Johnny, rakes his sweat-soaked hair back and says in an undertone, “Do you think he talked like that to his wife, and that's why they got the divorce?”

“Quiet,” hisses Johnny, because he knows that look on Coach's face and laughing right now will likely result in laps around the field.

Daniel rolls his eyes and hooks his elbows over his knees. He directs an innocent *I'm listening* face up at Coach, and Johnny has to press his lips together to stop himself from giving the game away.

Coach paces in front of them, a portrait of high school athletics passion in a bright green tracksuit. “You've all worked really hard this season, and I want you to know I'm proud of the improvements I've seen on the field. No matter what happens in tomorrow's game, that will not change.”

They all nod and wait.

“That said, this is the first time in seven years we've had a decent shot at the playoffs, and if I suspect you've given anything less than 150 percent of your effort, I will be making you dismantle the equipment shed board-by-board and handing in my resignation to the school board first thing next week.”

They all nod again.

“I want you to go home tonight and study the plays. I want you to eat a good, well-balanced meal. I want you well-rested. Consider calling in sick tomorrow at school, maybe spend the morning stretching.”

“Uh, Coach,” says Jim, raising his hand. Johnny and Bobby whisper sidelong to him frantically, but Coach notices before Jim can take the hint.

“Yes? A question, good. Shows you're listening.”

Jim lowers his hand and glances over at them hesitantly; Johnny

winces and Bobby puts his head in his hands.

“...Some of us have karate tonight. See, the All-Valley Under-18 Tournament's in a week and a half, so—”

“Excuse me, did you say kara-tay?” demands Coach. He looks around at his assistant coach. “Do you hear this? Do you think the football coaches ever have to deal with this shit?”

“Comes with the kicking, sir,” he says.

Coach looks back to Jim. “If I write you a note or something, will your little karate teacher excuse you?”

Jim appears frozen in place, brain likely glitching at the idea of handing a written excuse to Sensei.

Johnny internally sighs and speaks up, “Don't worry about it, Coach. We've been doing both all season, and we'll take it easy tonight.”

“Lawrence, you're in this too?” Coach looks around at them as if seeing the team for the first time. “How many of you do karate?” And then, as hands start to drift up he says sharply: “No. Don't answer that. I don't want to know.”

Daniel leans close into Johnny's space and says in a whisper Johnny can feel down to his toes, “Do you think they put something in the water in this town?”

Chapter 28

They're in the locker room suiting up before the game against Paramount when Parker comes sliding through in a mad panic. “Guys, guys – the Swede's back, he's *playing*.”

Groans issue out from around the room, and Johnny hangs his head. He doesn't know what the others are complaining about; the Swede's a center back, which means he's mostly going to be the forwards' problem.

Daniel pops up in between Johnny and Parker, bracing a hand on Johnny's shoulder. “What's the Swede?”

“He's a freak of nature,” says Johnny. Daniel still has a hand on him. He has to be doing this on purpose, but why would he mess with him right before the game? He meets his eyes and tries to telepathically communicate this while saying, “He's a junior, but he hit six foot back when he was like, eleven or something. He was out most of the season, torn ACL from the summer.”

“I heard he can run a four-minute mile,” says Parker ominously.

“And he's got a reach like Apollo Creed,” added Bobby.

“Well, okay – but this is soccer, that don't matter. Right?” says Daniel, looking around at everyone's grim faces.

“The Swede plays dirty,” says Johnny. “Look, if you see his hand coming up – just duck.”

Daniel's hand tightens fractionally on his shoulder; Johnny follows his own advice and shrugs roughly out from under it. The Swede was not the only one who played dirty, he thought.

“No way is that guy in high school,” says Daniel as they're walking out onto the field.

The Swede's already in position, and he's somehow even taller than Johnny remembered: a full head and shoulders over every other player on the field. What does Paramount feed their kids, growth hormones?

“Remember to duck,” says Johnny as the other boy passes him. The idea of Daniel going up against that guy has him feeling obscurely tense. He knows better than anyone how punchable Daniel is, but this would be like a mountain cat fighting a chipmunk.

“Who needs to duck?” replies the other boy with a backwards wry glance, “that guy's hand clears my head just hanging there.”

It turns out Johnny's worry is all misplaced; the Swede seems almost unsettled by Daniel, and generally treats him more like an irritating gnat than a real threat.

It's Johnny who catches the backhand twenty minutes into the first half.

“Oh, c'mon, Ref! That's gotta be a yellow card,” shouts Coach Reeve from the sidelines.

Johnny has his head tipped back, cupping his nose. He blinks and suddenly Daniel is in front of him, tugging his hand away. Johnny lets him. He manfully withstands it as Daniel puts his hands on his face and tips his head down to inspect it.

“Is it bleeding?” he asks, because he can't really sense anything past the sting. Nose hits are always the worst. Why would god put so many nerve endings in cartilage?

Daniel looks him over and shakes his head, “No, you're good. Hey,” he says, in a different tone. Johnny blinks at him. “You're good?” And he waits for him to nod before jogging back to position.

Paramount is given a warning; across the field, Daniel puts his head down and stares daggers at the Swede.

And Johnny's chest feels really strange, tight. He wonders if he took a secondary hit to it while he was distracted by the Swede's backhand.

Chapter 29

No one scores in the first half.

The locker room is tensely silent during the break. Johnny ices his nose for all of three minutes before he gets sick of holding the freezing bag and tosses it in a sink. When he turns back, Daniel is shaking his head, but he wisely for once says nothing.

Coach steps into the room, face very solemn. They straighten up.

“Good work in the first half,” he says. “They're a tough team, and if we have to, we'll hold them to zero and work it out in overtime. But enough of that defeatist talk – Parker, Lawrence, LaRusso.” They brace themselves, but he only says, “I know that kid's a mutant, but he's a gangly bastard, and his balance isn't as solid is it looks. Work around him.”

“Yes, Coach,” says Johnny dully.

“...Like telling the East Germans to work around the Berlin Wall,” says Daniel, not particularly quietly. Johnny makes a face at him and he returns it and then some.

“No pressure,” says Coach loudly, ignoring them with obvious effort. He got selectively deaf and blind on game days, “but we kind of need one of you to score if we're going to make playoffs. Been waiting seven years for this. So.” He nods firmly.

Daniel's face smooths out, going serious. Johnny ducks his head and digs his thumbs into his eyes. No pressure. Right.

Despite Coach's rousing pep talk, the second half drags on in much the same vein as the first.

The Swede seems like he has to take one stride for every two Johnny and the others take, and they're all exhausted by the end. It's zero-zero and there are only a few minutes left, and all Johnny can think is how they'll fall on their faces in overtime if this game doesn't end now.

He wipes his face on his jersey and shakes his head, trying to get his head back in the game. Far down the field, Tommy takes possession of

the ball just outside the penalty box and their guys begin another ragged advance.

Thirty feet away, Daniel is signaling to him.

Johnny looks between the ball – Jim's got it, he's evading a Paramount midfielder – and Daniel and shakes his head. But Daniel's jaw firms and he signals again and they're staring at each other while running, communicating without speaking.

Johnny's not even sure he's getting Daniel's meaning, but somehow his gut is sure of it.

The Swede, just as he has done all game, runs forward to stop the advance. He snatches the ball with an easy trap and sideways nudge and that's it, all that fucking running for *nothing*—

Except here is Daniel darting in fearlessly with a slide tackle.

It's one of those gravity-defying crooks of the leg over the grass that lets him pop up off his knees the next second and redirect the ball to Johnny. The Swede jumps and twists like a cockroach has just scurried between his legs; he overbalances, stumbles.

And Johnny's away with the ball.

He thinks he hears Daniel hollering, *Johnny, you got it!* And he has to assume he's still breathing because he's still running.

He throws everything he has into his kick. The goalie coils and jumps. The ball pounds the back of the net, well over two feet in the clear.

Johnny slows and stares. He has no idea how much time is left, but the look on the goalie's face says it all. He sucks in a belated breath and as it starts to sink in they've won, he turns around to see the rest of the team converging down the field.

Daniel's hands are on his knees (absolutely shit aerobic form just like always) and he's panting like he might pass out any second – but he's grinning over at Johnny wider than he's ever seen, exhilarated. Incandescent. Johnny's answering smile feels like it might break his face.

He shouts, breathless, and Daniel shouts back. And then he's sprinting forward and hauling the other boy up in the air and spinning around.

“You crazy little fucker,” he laughs, clutching, “you tackled the *Swede*. You slid right through his fucking legs!”

Daniel laugh-gasps in his ear and clings to his neck as Johnny shouts into the air and spins them again. It's like his hands were never meant to do anything else.

The rest of the guys collide with them all at once. They throw their arms around each other and jump and scream and for the first moment all season, they feel like a real team.

Chapter 30

First there is the victory party in the locker room, where they all pretend they don't notice the tears in Coach's eyes; and then there is the victory party outside in the parking lot, where they all pretend they aren't desperately impatient to shake off their proud parents. Finally, there is the victory party down at the beach with two huge bonfires of drift wood and torn-up beer boxes.

It is the first beach victory party Daniel has come to.

He rides in Johnny's car.

Johnny commits to nursing one single, solitary brave little beer the whole night, because he promised Mrs. LaRusso he'd drive Daniel home but also, and much more pressingly: he does not trust himself to drink around Daniel after what happened in Santa Barbara. They have a good thing going now, and he isn't about to ruin it by getting gay and provoking the other boy's worst instincts.

So he sips his beer and watches his teammates slam theirs. He tends the fires and jokes around and generally basks in the warmth of being really fucking awesome.

Like, the *best.*

A couple of the midfielders who didn't get much play time that day bring a ball, and there's some scuffling over it on the loose sand a little further down the beach. Daniel splits his time between sneak attacking the pack out in the dark and slumping down next to Johnny by the fire, sand all over his legs and his hair a curling mass tossed by the sea breeze.

Every time he returns to the fire, he has a fresh beer in hand. Johnny thinks it's going to be really funny to see him drunk for once. He hopes he says a lot of really embarrassing shit; he can't wait.

Daniel's not the first to get drunk though.

“Gonna, y'know what?” Dutch turns his head and belches a beer's worth into the salt air. He points across the fire. “Gonna be honest. I

don't understand what the fuck is happening with you two on any given day."

Johnny's legs tense up but Bobby mutters sidelong to Dutch, "Their moms are friends, it's not that complicated. You know how Johnny is about his mom."

There had to be a way to say that and make it sound cooler, he thinks wistfully.

"Johnny's mom's great," says Daniel cheerfully, which: yeah, perfect. What a totally normal thing for a guy to say about another guy's mother.

Johnny stabs the fire with the stir stick and says, "She *is* great," and then stares everyone down who dares look his way.

"Okay, Mrs. Lawrence is great," says Dutch. "Fine. Whatever. I don't care. I'm just – I gotta know: are we still trying to beat the snot out of this guy at the tournament, or what?" He points across the fire to Daniel, whose smile fades. He glances around the fire until his eyes land on Johnny, who shifts uncomfortably and says:

"We're all in the tournament to win. That's what matters, not some bullshit feud."

"Dutch, like you're even going to make it past the quarter final," laughs Tommy suddenly, and this sets off a whole round of crossfire shit talking.

In the midst of it, Johnny elbows Daniel in the knee until he glances over and then he gives him a small shrug. He doesn't even know what he's trying to say, but Daniel seems to get it.

They stay out on the beach until all the beer is gone and most of the guys have sobered halfway up. It's the middle of the night and the game has caught up to them all. Everyone is done, except Johnny, who is suffering.

"C'mon, it's like two in the morning," he begs Daniel, who has spent the past fifteen minutes attempting and failing to do a cartwheel on the sand.

“You got him?” calls Bobby from further up the sandbank.

“Define *got*,” replies Johnny loudly.

Bobby waves and deserts.

“I'm just saying, I used to be able to do these,” says Daniel from his position crumpled over in the sand. “What happened? Did I lose my confidence or something?”

“Uh, *no*,” says Johnny. “I think you're good there. Have you considered the five beers you drank earlier?”

Daniel flaps his hand at him. “Yeah, yeah. Play DD one night and suddenly you're a wise guy.”

“I'm going now,” says Johnny firmly, taking a two steps back. “So unless you want to walk back to Reseda, I suggest you follow.” He takes another step. “You hear me, man?”

Daniel sighs like he's being crushed by the world, but he finally clambers to his feet. Relieved, Johnny turns and starts walking up the bank to the where the car is parked.

He doesn't hear him coming because running on soft sand makes no noise.

Daniel jumps on his back, knees tucking in against his ribs. Johnny stumbles forward but doesn't fall and after a moment of panic he recognizes what is happening.

“*Seriously*?” he says, trying to control his voice.

Daniel tightens his grip around his shoulders. “Your legs are longer, it'll go faster. Also I am beat.”

“Oh, and I'm not? Last piggyback ride I gave someone was my stepdad's five-year-old niece,” says Johnny. “And you're a lot heavier than she was.” But somehow his arms are coming up and looping under his legs. So this is happening. Don't think about it, he thinks. Just move.

He takes a few steps and then stops, because Daniel is dragging a hand up over his face, blinding him, and then – combing through his hair.

“Ugh, quit that,” he says, ducking his head. It's like trying to shake off a fly.

“Your mom does it,” says Daniel, “and you let her.”

“I thought this was going to be embarrassing for you, and it is, but how is it somehow still embarrassing for me?” He can't win with this kid.

“Hey, Johnny?” says Daniel sleepily, ten steps on. His head is heavy over Johnny's shoulder, and his nose tickles his neck whenever he breathes through it.

“Yeah?”

“We won today, man. You and me. We did it.”

Johnny says nothing but sighs and hitches the other boy's increasingly sleep-limp body further up his back. He tightens his grip. And, because there's no one around to see it, he smiles into the night.

Chapter 31

Two days later, Johnny wakes up still smiling.

When he gets to the field at school, Daniel is sitting beside the shed waiting for him. Johnny's heart stutters in his chest but his stride remains unchecked.

When he spots him, Daniel groans in relief and throws himself back on the grass, arms outstretched like a total drama queen. “Finally, I was starting to feel like a real dope sitting here.”

Johnny digs into his pocket for the shed key and says only, “How long you been waiting?”

“Like, five minutes.”

Johnny nods because he doesn't know what else to do or say. He opens the shed and grabs a ball and then turns to look at the other boy. He could only be here for one thing, he figures.

Daniel doesn't so much as blink when he kicks the ball to him.

“So what's the longest you ever keep it up in the air for, anyway?” says Daniel, hitting the ball with his knee towards him.

Johnny traps the ball against his chest and returns it. “Like – forty minutes?”

“Think we can do better?”

“No way,” he says instantly. “This requires concentration, LaRusso. Focus.”

“You saying I can't focus? You should see my karate training.”

“Do you jabber the whole time during that too? No way you can shut up for forty minutes.”

“Who says I need to? We been going for five already.”

Johnny lets his mouth curl into a slight smirk. He heads the ball, and doesn't look away from its passage through the crisp, pale morning air.

“Do you seriously do this every day?” asks Daniel.

“No, just – sometimes. My stepdad's a dick, and I don't really like hanging around at home.”

Daniel hits the ball a little too wide, and Johnny has to sprint to catch it before it hits the ground.

“Anyway, so all the while the Visitors have been acting friendly and like, entwining themselves with the Earth's government, they've also been low-key influencing people and the media and stuff to turn public sentiment against human scientists. It's actually pretty politically astute. And then this guy discovers the Visitors don't look like us at all, they're these freaky giant reptiles that eat live animals and shit. And then in the second episode – hey, hey. Are you listening to me?”

“Nope,” says Johnny and heads the ball back.

Eventually Johnny hits the ball too far and Daniel doesn't get it in time.

They both collapse back on the wet grass. Johnny's legs are aching and for some reason, so is his mouth.

“How long was that?” asks Daniel, a little breathlessly.

Johnny checks his watch. “Thirty seven minutes.” He lets his head fall back and he gazes at the sky.

“Damnit.”

“Eh, there's always another day,” he says, philosophical. This was the closest he's come since the spring, after all. Daniel says nothing to that, which strikes him after a couple seconds as weird. His brow pinches.

He looks over into a kiss.

Daniel's lips are soft, and not tentative so much as careful. He tastes like mint toothpaste. He's up on one elbow, leaning over Johnny and after a second he reaches a hand up to cradle Johnny's face.

The morning sun presses red against his eyelids; Johnny realizes he has closed his eyes.

They snap open wide. He plants a hand on the middle of Daniel's chest and shoves him roughly back.

Chapter 32

“What the fuck are you doing?” he says.

Daniel's back on his elbows, looking like he's just been forcibly dragged out of a daydream. His lower lip is wet, and he bites it as he looks up at Johnny, puzzled.

Johnny doesn't want to look at him anymore. He can't stand the sight of their legs sprawled out next to each other. His fingers dig into the soft grass and he pushes up.

“Johnny, wait—” says Daniel, still sounding confused.

“That's sick shit, man,” he says, shaking off his grasping hand.

Daniel falls back again. “*Sick*? What are you talking about? Hey, hold up!” And he scrambles after him, demanding to his back, “Are you seriously telling me you didn't want to know what it was like?”

“...What?”

Johnny slows and stops. His mind races over the past couple weeks: how Daniel stopped baiting him, stopped antagonizing him. He thinks about him coming up to Johnny during practice a dozen times and the look on his face, and he thinks about how he'd seen that look before, when Daniel was angling for Ali. Laying on the charm thick like fucking gelato.

And Johnny's always known he is kinda dumb, could be better at school and stuff. But he didn't think he was this much of an idiot.

He turns around and stares. “Were you – biding your time? This whole thing, waiting to jump me?”

Daniel flaps his arms. “You make me sound like a supervillian, what the hell. That's not – that's not the word I'd use, no. Don't be ridiculous.”

“Then what, were you *seducing* me?”

“Why,” says Daniel, sounding like his patience was already fraying, “do you keep talking like I have some secret special knowledge about all this stuff? *You* started it.”

“Because you do, you always have,” says Johnny, accusing. “You knew before, in the hotel—”

“Yeah, because you were fucking shouting about it, you moron! Like you're shouting now.” And as Johnny steps back and heads for the shed with the ball, feeling buffeted by hurricane-force winds, Daniel gives chase. He continues: “You should check if the Village People need an MC, might be a good career for you. And none of this is even touching upon how blatant you are the rest of the time—”

Johnny turns and shoves him hard against the open door of the shed. He puts a finger in his face and says, “I told you to stop saying that.”

“Why should I?” He shoots back. “You put this in my head, man. How am I supposed to feel, what am I supposed to think about, when you look at me *all the time* like you want to—”

Panic and nausea rise like a flash flood and Johnny lashes out, punching him in the gut. Daniel doubles over with a low noise.

He drops his fists just as quickly as he raised them. A fine tremor has started up in his legs, it's like his body wants to shake itself apart at the joints. He stares down at Daniel and the pain twisting his face and he feels himself go pale.

Daniel rolls a venomous look up at him, eyes dark and hot. “Didn't realize you were this much of a coward.”

Johnny turns and runs and doesn't look back.

Chapter 33

Johnny rounds a corner.

He's over by the dumpsters outside the school kitchens, and he has to stop because something is happening. He looks around wildly and sees nothing, but that can't be, that's not real. That's not real because something is wrong. Why else would his heart be racing? Something is very wrong with the world.

As he stumbles back against the bricks, he thinks nonsensically: oh, it's me.

He sinks down to the ground, clutching his knees clumsily with his forearms because he can't seem to unbend his fingers. He shakes. He tries to breathe, but every desperate lungful comes up somehow empty. It's like trying to force the air through a clogged sieve.

He stares across at the dumpsters. One of the lids wasn't shut properly and has flown open, and a large white sack of dehydrated potatoes keeps flapping like a flag, threatening to blow out.

After a while, he drops his gaze to his hands, which he still can't unclench. He doesn't understand: his fist looks completely normal. It's unscathed, of course it is. He knows how to throw a proper punch.

The next night at the dojo, Sensei paces slowly between the rows of their formation. It is harder to say which is worse: when he pauses before you and takes your measure, or when he slips out of your sight entirely, and you know anything might happen. When in formation, Johnny and his friends are somehow never more together nor more isolated.

Sensei never has to raise his voice for it to fill the room. “This dojo has fought hard to get where it is now. We are the best in the valley, and we have proven that by taking number one in the tournament for the past two years.”

Johnny stands absolutely still. He doesn't even blink. In the dojo he can be a blank slate: pure, unthinking force. It's such a relief.

Sensei stops in front of him and inclines his head, giving Johnny permission to look up. Then he holds Johnny's eyes and says deliberately:

“We are on top. There is no going back.”

After a moment, Johnny gives an infinitesimal nod; Sensei moves on.

“When you fight in a couple days' time, you will remember you are not only fighting for yourself. You are fighting for each other. When you are weak, you make us all weak. When you fail, you fail us all.” Sensei reaches the front of the room and turns, hands at his belt. He asks silkily, “Will you fail us?”

“No, Sensei!” they reply as one.

“Outside these walls, everyone is a potential enemy. Tell me, what do we do to the enemy?”

“Strike first, strike hard, no mercy!”

Sensei surveys them and smiles.

Chapter 34

School, study hall. Day before the tournament. He hasn't really been sleeping. His vision has taken on a certain glazed quality. The world is keeping him at arm's length.

The room is split fairly evenly into two groups: those who are slacking off because Christmas is a week away and nothing seems to matter, and those who are studying, because finals are ongoing, eternal, and apparently matter a lot.

He glances over to Ali at the next table; she either ignores him or doesn't notice. He whispers her name. Definitely ignores him.

Whatever.

He grabs his bag and moves over to her table. When he tries to pull the chair across from her out, she hooks her feet around its legs. He tugs, she perseveres. Finally looking at him; glaring. Progress.

He raises his eyebrows and slowly puts a hand on the chair diagonal from hers. Her brow flattens. He drags it out and sits. Success. Victory. He is unstoppable.

She returns to her textbook.

He leans forward and whispers her name. A kid at the next table over tells him to shut up; the passing librarian reprimands them both.

He sighs and digs out a crumpled notebook from his backpack. Cover torn off, spiral binding half unwound: a stabbing hazard every time he dares puts a hand in his bag. (End of semester, give him a break.)

He scrawls: IS HE STILL FIGHTING TOMORROW and shoves the notebook across the table. Her eyes flick up and read it. She clearly thinks about ignoring him again, so he nudges her textbook with the notebook, insistent. Her eyes narrow. Finally: reluctantly, she nods.

He takes the notebook back and writes below the first message: TELL HIM NOT TO.

Her mouth curls, skeptical of his motivations and hey, he doesn't blame her. He doesn't know what the fuck he's doing anymore. He presses his mouth tight. Throws an arm across the table to add: GONNA GET HIS ASS KICKED.

She picks up her fancy green pen then and pauses over the notebook, glancing at him. He waits.

You don't know that, she writes. Small and neat.

He collapses violently back in his chair, throwing his arms out in a silent show of are-you-fucking-kidding with a sequel production of look-at-me and a more obscure, probably less clear rendition of do-you-remember-last-year-I-was-fucking-amazing-no-one-scored-a-single-point-on-me.

When he returns to the notebook, she has added: have you been drinking during school hours again?

He scowls tiredly at her.

The librarian is suddenly beside the table. She looks down at him, pitiless from too many years of watching boys like him drag ass through the hallways of this place. She offers him detention like it's one for the road.

“Honestly?” says Johnny. “I could use the sleep.”

Chapter 35

The morning of the tournament, Johnny gets up and does his first series of warm-up stretches on the floor by his bed. His mind is blank. This is a lie.

He takes a shower. His runs his hands methodically over his skin and through his hair, eyes closed, and his mind is blank. This is a lie.

Downstairs, Laura is in the kitchen in her bathrobe – up early for a Saturday. She can't bear to watch his matches, so she tries to make up for it by always making him breakfast. A three-egg omelet with Monterey Jack, Canadian bacon, diced red onion and green bell pepper, served with a tall glass of orange juice. As he eats, she walks behind him on her way out of the kitchen and pauses at his chair. She kisses the crown of his head. His mind is blank; this is a lie.

After breakfast, he brushes his teeth. He stares in the mirror at the damp-darkened fringe of his hair, the tightness around his eyes. His mind is blank.

This is a lie.

Back in his room, he carefully takes out the plastic bag holding his tournament gi. He unzips it and lifts out the thick cotton vest; the trousers with his hard-won patches, past proof of worth. He pulls them on and ties them together with his black belt and his mind is blank.

This is a lie.

He drives to the arena. The cassette in the deck hits the end of Side A halfway there but he does not bother to flip it; he can't be sure which tape is even in there, because he wasn't listening, because listening requires space and his mind has none, it is not blank but full of static. Static is the opposite of focus, an image that is not an image at all, no matter how long you might stare at it. But static still occupies space. It still creates noise.

Johnny arrives at the arena; he's early and able to find good parking.

Chapter 36

He steadies after he meets up with the guys and they do their group warm-up. It's easy to blend in and let everything else fade once he's back on familiar ground. None of them seem to notice anything off with him, not even Bobby. Reassuring; it's almost like nothing is actually wrong. Maybe it was all in his head.

They wander the complex, restless and amped up with that pre-tournament energy. Their bodies know they'll be fighting soon, and the sights, sounds, and smells of concessions food and milling civilians makes for a poor combination. They decide to scope out the competition.

Johnny stops to take a drink from a water fountain in the locker room. He's still drinking when he hears Dutch say further in:

“Well, well – found Daniel.”

He straightens abruptly and looks down the hall to where the guys are bunched up outside one of the locker cages.

“Oh. Uh – hey, guys.”

Johnny's skin tightens at the sound of his voice. He can tell immediately – Daniel doesn't get it; he thinks he's talking to his stupid soccer teammates. He starts down the hallway as the others enter the cage, fanning out. He slides around the door.

Somehow he never thought to prepare himself for the sight of Daniel, half dressed in a white gi. He's fully in Johnny's world now.

He feels a rush of resentment towards him for it, for digging and clawing until there was no part of Johnny's life left undiscovered. Soccer, dinners with his mom, the fiery crash and burn of his straightness – whatever. Daniel got to see him in those places. He shouldn't get this too.

Johnny realizes at the same moment Dutch does that Daniel doesn't know how to do up his gi jacket. He wants to close his eyes. Why is Daniel even *here*?

“What's the matter, Danielle? Mommy not here to dress you?” says Dutch.

Daniel just cuts his eyes past him to Johnny, like he isn't surrounded close by four other guys. Because he's an idiot, he doesn't look scared – he looks furious. Like his blood is burning with the same need to fight.

Johnny kicks his leg up, leans against the door, and decides it's safer to say nothing.

Dutch's face hardens. He hates being ignored. “Hey,” he snaps, “I'm talking to you—” and he makes his move. Johnny lets it happen; better Daniel realize what he's facing now.

Dutch shoves Daniel hard, and he flies back against the bench. Quick as always, temper ever shitty, Daniel rebounds and lands in a defensive position, hands up.

“C'mon, then,” he says, eyes wide. “C'mon!”

Johnny sees a flash of red out of the corner of his eye and calls, “Dutch.”'

They all blink over at him. Johnny doesn't look at Daniel again. “Let's go. There are referees hanging around, do you want to be disqualified before the first round?”

It's only a second before Dutch relaxes out of his stance. He sneers at Daniel and backs off, and the other file obediently out.

“Did you see his face? They're gonna eat that boy alive out there,” crows Dutch. The locker room is so big and empty, his words must echo around, back to Daniel.

Johnny only wishes he didn't agree.

Chapter 37

Worse than seeing Daniel cross the arena floor with Ali rubbing his shoulders; worse than watching him look around in confusion at every last little thing – the mats, the crowd, the referees, his own fucking opponent, like, *oh, who's this guy and why's he standing across from me?* – worse than all of that is the needling, pathetic voice in Johnny's head that says, *this could've gone different.*

He thinks there is probably some alternate universe where Daniel came to this tournament as a spectator. Johnny doesn't know if that would be any better, if having Daniel in the stands watching him fight would set his mind at ease or spin it up worse. He's never found Daniel's gaze easy to withstand, which is probably why he's so fucked up now. Because Daniel's spent the past several months watching him all the time.

Or maybe there's a universe where Daniel moved here and didn't meet Ali on that beach, where he stepped inside the dojo one day and joined Cobra Kai. Johnny thinks about that possibility for only a second and then buries it deep, because he doesn't like the idea of Daniel in Cobra Kai. Poor fit, for one thing. Even if he survived Sensei's uncompromising brand of training, which Johnny can't picture – the world isn't ready for a Daniel LaRusso trained in the way of the fist.

Johnny knows he should be watching the first of the Cobra Kai matches, but he can't drag his gaze away from Mat 3 across the room. Between moving bodies, he watches Daniel awkwardly bob in a bow. He watches his open expression and darting eyes as the referee sets his hand between the two fights.

He watches as Daniel startles and is driven backwards off the mat by the first strike raised his way.

Johnny shakes out his shoulders a little and resets his gaze to the match in front him. He resolves not to watch Daniel embarrass himself out of the tournament in the first round. He should enjoy it – he knows Dutch and the others sure will. But it just makes him feel squirmy and sick.

The next time he glances at the tournament bracket, he is jolted to see the name LaRusso in the second round. He spends several minutes thinking there's been an administrative error.

Chapter 38

Daniel comes over to watch Bobby's first match, and Johnny can't stop himself from walking around the perimeter. He flashes an awkward, tight smile at Lucille, who is just leaving; ignores the narrow look Ali gives him; warily eyes Daniel's sensei, who is watching the match with what he thinks is some flavor of disapproval.

He sidles up to Daniel's free side and mutters without looking away from the mat, “How the hell did you win your first match? Last I looked, you were running backwards like you wanted rewind time.”

“Oh, so you were watching me?” said Daniel. He sounds almost normal, like himself, but he is gnawing on his thumbnail like an animal caught in a trap. His dark eyes dart around, taking in the match.

On the mat, the referee steps in to separate Bobby and the other fighter, locking his arms to push them apart when they resist. Bobby's hyped like he only gets in a fight: furious and nothing like his usual calm self. Johnny's never really thought about it, but he sees Daniel take it in like it's a kick to the face.

Bobby shrugs his shoulders roughly, tugging his vest back into place. He says to his opponent, “You're history, man. You're *dead*.” And it's nothing all of them haven't said in a tournament a hundred times, but —

“Jesus,” breathes Daniel. “What's with you guys. You load up on steroids this morning or something?”

Johnny's arms tighten across his chest and he bites out, “It's called a game face.”

“You forget, I've been in games with Bobby. I've never seen him talk like that.”

“How could I forget?" he says without thinking, and Daniel twitches. He quickly adds, "Well, take a good look, man. You don't stand a chance in the next round.”

A few days ago, this might've been friendly, normal shit talk. Now it feels like an actual threat.

Daniel catches himself before he can look up to him; Johnny can tell by the slight jerk of his face. After a second he says, “Aw, Johnny – you should know better by now than to count me out.”

Johnny opens his mouth to reply, but then his eyes catch on Sensei across the mat. He isn't watching the match anymore, because Bobby's about to win; he's looking over at Johnny narrowly. Probably wondering why he isn't standing beside him anymore. They're supposed to present a unified front in the tournaments. A wall of deadly black.

Johnny swipes his lip and nods slightly. He leans in close to Daniel and says, “Don't say I didn't warn you,” and returns to his sensei's side, where he belongs.

Chapter 39

Johnny fought in his first All-Valley when he was thirteen, and he got his *ass kicked*.

Sensei helped a lot by not making a big deal of his injuries. He let him know in no uncertain terms that getting hurt sometimes happened, and the only thing he could control was how he responded to it. Was he going to cry and quit, or decide to do better next time? Decide to make sure it didn't happen again.

His mom couldn't handle it. Before the tournament, she'd only watched bits and pieces of his dojo training. She wasn't prepared to see him double over or get thrown to the mat and hit. When she saw his black eye and bleeding lip afterwards, she actually cried.

And on the drive home, she said: you're not doing this anymore. You're not going back there.

It was the biggest fight they'd ever had. Johnny was panicky and sick, turning fully around in his seat to shout at her. It was two days before he could make her understand – not why he wanted to continue, she couldn't understand that, but that he had to. *He had to*.

He didn't know how to explain the feeling that came over him when he did karate, how all the stray sprawling tendrils of his thoughts reversed course and retracted. No more blinking and realizing he'd missed the past several minutes of a conversation; no more hating himself for being weird, slow, fucking dumb. When he stood barefoot on a mat and assumed the first stance, he settled into himself. His mind locked into place and narrowed down like a laser. He was finally *right*.

It's like magic, was all he could say to her. It's what I'm meant to do.

Anyway,

to Johnny's relief, the magic is still there, despite everything. The world still falls away the moment he steps onto the mat himself. Daniel doesn't exist. His friends don't exist. Even Sensei no longer

registers as a factor.

When Johnny is on the mat, he is always alone but it never feels wrong.

He lets his opponent come to him, because he's never fought him before and wants to see what to expect. The guy advances far into his corner, completely unsuspecting, and leads with a basic lunge punch that Johnny has no problem snatching aside like, *hey, thanks for the leverage, buddy*. He delivers a kick to his chest, following it with a neat switch-up to give him another in the head.

It's all over in a few seconds, and it's not that it was effortless, but it was smooth.

When he turns around to his solid wall of black, he spots Daniel a few feet away, walking quickly away.

Chapter 40

He has forty minutes before his third match, which is just long enough that he decides to find one of the small practice rooms the arena has set aside and do some stretches to stay warmed-up.

He's on his back when the door opens and Daniel steps in. It's only his rigorous commitment to his left hamstring that lets him keep holding position.

“What,” he says flatly to the paneled ceiling, “do you want.”

He looks over in time to see Daniel make a face. At his sides, his fingers lift slightly – and how is it possible for fingers to be so sarcastic?

Daniel says, “Oh, excuse me. I thought I'd use my time to stay ready. Didn't know that was only in the purview of Cobra Kai dojo.”

Johnny doesn't know what *purview* means, but he can guess from the context. He says, “Don't give me that. You think I don't remember you slacking in stretches during games?”

“Hey, I stretch plenty.”

“Bullshit. You skate by on being naturally flexible.”

The pause that comes after this – in retrospect, *not* stinging – retort makes Johnny lean abruptly up out of his hamstring stretch and bend determinedly over his right leg.

Calves. So important.

“You ready to admit I'm in this for real?” asks Daniel.

Instead of responding, Johnny directs a long, critical look at him. After a moment, Daniel gets it and settles on the mat, as far away as he can from Johnny. He pauses again and then rolls his eyes and reluctantly bends over his left knee.

“You are so bad at this,” Johnny says to the wall. He doesn't understand how his pulse is beating faster now than it had during his first two matches.

“Made it to the third round, didn't I?” comes the dark-voiced reply.

Fuck this kid. He's done.

Johnny rolls up to his feet without responding, but when he turns to the door, Daniel is already there. His commitment to stretching is truly a disgrace to all athletes, Johnny thinks.

He's had enough. He thinks he knows what's happening here anyway: Daniel thinks he has some secret knowledge of Johnny's weakness and, like the nerdy probably-plays-chess piece of shit prick he is, he is trying to use it against him now.

He swiftly crosses the practice room mat. When Daniel realizes he isn't checking his stride, he hastily backs up until he hits the wall. Johnny has a point to prove, so he doesn't stop until his gi is touching the other boy's.

“I know what you're trying to do,” he says, “and it's not going to work.”

“I'm not trying to do anything except survive,” says Daniel, tipping his chin. Maybe it's defiance, but it looks like a good angle for a kiss. Johnny hates that he thinks this.

“I don't believe you,” he bites out.

Daniel searches his eyes for a moment before suddenly making a big show of relaxing. He leans against the wall like he'd always intended to fetch up against it and says, “You know, Ali told me you wanted me to drop out of this thing.”

Johnny makes his arms like bars against the wall, so he doesn't lean in. “Thought I'd save you the humiliation, don't say I didn't try.”

Daniel nods slowly, dark eyes darting over him. “Yeah,” he says. “Thought that might be it.”

And Johnny gets to breathe for a second.

“But then,” says Daniel, pressing forward slightly and doing a great job of pretending he didn't mind Johnny being so close, “I thought maybe you were worried I'd show you up, be better than you thought. And I figured you couldn't handle that. Like maybe, if I won, you'd have to realize I was on your level.”

Johnny rears back from him like he's been stung. The only other option is shoving him back against the wall and kissing him, and his

survival instinct is too strong for that.

“You'll never be on my level,” he says instead, and hauls the practice room door open.

Daniel beats Tommy with a simple jab to the chest.

Sensei turns away from the mat and murmurs to Johnny and Dutch, “I'm starting to think that kid is going to be a problem.”

Chapter 41

Daniel's defense first fails him against Dutch.

Johnny knows it's going to happen, he expects it; he knows Dutch's brutal style of fighting. He's gone up against it enough times. At a certain point, skill doesn't matter next to a single-minded desire to hurt.

But when Dutch clips Daniel in the face, knocking him clean to the mat, Johnny has to turn around. Like if he looks away it won't count.

He feels Sensei glance his way, and he pretends he is scoping out the other matches. A weak pretense, and he feels weak. He hates it but can't seem to change no matter how hard he tries to urge the feeling into something else.

So he doesn't see it when Daniel somehow turns things around. But he sees Dutch's furious, tight face right after, and he sees Daniel wincing and fumbling for his ribs as he walks off the mat towards his sensei.

Daniel has somehow won, again. And now he's a semi-finalist.

Johnny is forced to think, for the first time, what it might be like to have to face him on the mat in the final match.

His next match is on the reconfigured center mat, and they announce him to give everyone a proper idea of the stakes. He doesn't look over to Daniel. He doesn't look at anyone.

Defending champion, John Lawrence of the Cobra Kai, two-time winner of the under-18 golden trophy, and Sensei folds a hand over his shoulder like he can touch the victory so long as he's touching Johnny.

Sensei says, “You know what to do,” and he bows to him like Johnny's a real fighter. Someone worthy.

This burst of confidence is enough to drive Johnny onto the mat, against the flashy hotshot Vidal. His focus doesn't fail him, and he fights his way into the final without accepting a single point against him.

His friends reach their arms out from the side, pulling him back out of the match and the moment. He breathes, nods, and kind of smiles as they announce the next fight. For a moment, everything feels clear and simple, standing under the arms of the other Cobra Kai students. Their smiles are for him, because they know his fight was for them.

And then Sensei says, “Bobby, I want him out of commission.”

Chapter 42

Bobby's eyes crash into Johnny's, and he looks down without thinking, because he can't think. He isn't really even here.

“Sensei, I can take him,” says Bobby and – yes, yes, he could. And if anyone should, if anyone does, let it be Bobby.

It spools out in his head, this idea, one thought cascading into the other like a jacob's ladder toy – Daniel wouldn't mind losing to Bobby, not like he would to anyone else, not like if he lost to Tommy or Dutch, who roughed him up, or to Johnny, who— whatever. Bobby could beat Daniel, who'd maybe finally accept it, and then Bobby and Johnny could have the match they've been joking-not-joking about for a year. And afterwards, maybe Johnny could get his head on right and go talk to Daniel. People keep telling him how fucking important talking is, so that's what he'll do, he'll go talk to him. And they could – they could—

“I don't want him beaten,” says Sensei, and Johnny has to look back at him, because he doesn't understand. And then he does, and his thoughts fracture and fall apart. After a second, he can't remember even what they were.

“But – I'll be disqualified,” says Bobby, clinging to this one final argument. That's where Sensei always draws the line: *there are no rules in a real fight, but in competition we'll pretend to play by theirs. Do what you need to do, but don't get disqualified.*

Sensei turns slightly to Bobby, using his full mass, the muscles in his arms bunching. He stares him down and he says again, “Out of commission.”

He sees the moment Bobby breaks and gives in. He doesn't try arguing again; no one argues with Sensei.

Johnny still hasn't said a word.

When they first moved in with Sid, during those early days, the man tried playing along with the whole good stepfather image, and they had game nights. Sorry and Life and Monopoly.

Johnny hated Monopoly.

Sid didn't care that he was a kid. He inevitably bought up half the board and put those stupid hotels and houses all over it, the greens and reds cluttering up Johnny's vision and making it hard to see any hope or possibility on the board. Sid never cut Johnny any slack, and the game usually ended pretty quick.

It wasn't enough to be the best, he needed Johnny to be the worst. It was never enough to beat him, he wanted Johnny dominated, destroyed.

Bobby and Daniel take their places on the mat and Johnny thinks: look at me.

Fucking look at me.

He knows, he just *knows* – if they were on some field somewhere, if Daniel was looking for him, Johnny could communicate that way, warn him somehow. But Daniel for once isn't looking at him; he's got his focus and he's watching his opponent, and he has no clue what's coming.

Bobby looks over one last time and Johnny finally meets his eyes. He glances quickly back at Sensei, hoping for some signal to pass between them. Last second stay of execution, governor's pardon, whatever.

But Sensei only folds his arms and waits.

Johnny realizes why he didn't like Daniel standing in the Cobra Kai dojo about the same moment Bobby takes out his knee.

He thinks they could be in the middle of a packed football stadium, with tens of thousands of people roaring in the stands, and he would still hear the sound Daniel makes when he collapses to the mat.

Chapter 43

Lying there, broken: the anger and humiliation still flooding his body is almost – *almost* – enough to block out the agony in his leg, and he wishes like hell he'd never met Johnny Lawrence.

In some alternate universe, Daniel left the beach early, or decided not to go out for soccer his senior year, and Johnny Lawrence was just a vague name lost in the hallways at school, one tall blond head among a pack of them. Or maybe they still met, but in that alternate universe, Johnny didn't zero in on him like Daniel was something special, like he never wanted to look at anyone else. And Daniel could go on living in happy ignorance.

(There is also an alternate universe where Johnny didn't deny him, didn't refuse this thing between them. Daniel does not think about this universe, because if he can't be that irresistible version of himself, he'd rather pretend it's a complete impossibility.)

“Can you fix my leg with that thing you do?” he says.

Mr. Miyagi's brow pinches. He doesn't get it; he's too preoccupied with Daniel's injured knee, and he can't see the other pain he's in.

“No need fight anymore,” he assures him. “You proved a point.”

Bile rises in his throat. “Oh, what, that I can take a beating? Every time I see him, he'll know they got the best of me.” He realizes what he said and rushes on. “I'll never have any balance that way. Not with *them*, not with Ali... not with me.” He's not ready to give up. There has to be a way he can still finish this; he'll crawl back out there on his forearms army-style if he has to. He tries putting that in his eyes as he pleads. “Mr. Miyagi, please. I have to fight. I have to face him.”

After a long moment of studying him, Mr. Miyagi shuts his eyes like he's the one in pain. Daniel watches and hopes and tries not to think about what he'll do if this doesn't work.

When Mr. Miyagi opens his eyes again, he is already rubbing his hands together. But he doesn't look exactly thrilled.

Chapter 44

Sensei is still holding the belt Bobby threw in his face. He's got it clutched in his right fist like it's a life he took at Coyote Creek, and he looks nothing but pleased.

He nudges Johnny onto the mat like someone walking their prize dog out to accept Best in Show. And Johnny goes, because what difference does it make now? There's no quicker way through this but to just get it over with. He stands in the center of the mat under the bright lights, and he doesn't look at the crowd or Sensei, or really anything at all.

The announcer is rattling off a plug for a local car wash, trying to fill the time as they wait for the clock to tick down.

This is stupid, Johnny thinks. Yeah, the rule book says fifteen minutes, but following this formality when the other guy's probably on his way to the hospital feels almost cruel. Fifteen minutes is an eternity for Johnny to stand here and get stared down by the crowd, everyone in the stands thinking he's a cheat, a fraud.

He actually almost smiles when the announcer finally crosses over to pick up the trophy, he's so relieved.

“Ladies and gentlemen, this is the moment we've been waiting for.” You're telling me, thinks Johnny, letting out a long breath. But the announcer breaks off, and he looks over in confusion at Ali, suddenly standing at the man's shoulder.

“Daniel LaRusso is going to fight?”

Johnny closes his eyes and shakes his head slightly. He can't. He wouldn't, not even *he* would—

“Daniel LaRusso is going to fight!”

Chapter 45

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The announcer is shaking his head and grinning, like this incredibly stupid display of pride they were all about to witness is something worth admiration and not astonished denial. Look at this plucky kid, says his expression. How brave and exciting, claps the audience.

You are beyond *belief*, Johnny thinks at Daniel.

The other boy doesn't look away as he limps up onto the mat.

Johnny faces his opponent, and the world doesn't go away; the focus does not come. His thoughts branch out like one of those spirals the math teacher showed them once: endless and curving in themselves. The fighter studies how Daniel is holding himself, the precise amount of weight he has shifted off his bad knee; the teammate thinks *fuck, Coach is going to kill us all*; the boy wants to drag Daniel's arm over his shoulder and get them both out of here, away from the prying eyes and that fucking trophy.

Daniel tries to get into position and wobbles. He looks down to correct his stance, and Johnny shakes his head.

The crowd is so noisy; has it always been this loud in here? Whistles and claps and random stray shouts from voices he can't place: *Johnny, you got this! Go, Daniel!* Who the fuck are all these people?

Three points to win and end this. Johnny's scored as many in less than a minute in the past.

They bow to the ref. They turn and lock eyes. Daniel's not shaking anymore; he's gone still like a cobra.

They bow to each other; the ref's hand comes up.

Johnny flies across the mat.

Chapter End Notes

Assuming I don't crash and perish on the interstate in the next four hours, I will be picking back up this evening and (hopefully)

finishing this story.

Chapter 46

He hasn't fought so wild or sloppy in years.

He chases Daniel around the mat, feet slapping with misplaced momentum, every kick missed or blocked. Daniel's fighting Johnny but Johnny's fighting the whole world, and he's losing. He's not big enough for this.

The first strike that lands is on his chest, and his vision almost whites out in disbelief. He swears and tosses his whole body into it, lashing out and shoving Daniel out of blind instinct. The other boy stumbles; Johnny remembers his knee and feels even worse.

Get it together, he tells himself. He repeats it until the words run together, pile up. Eight lane car crash. Nobody's going home any time soon.

They reset, go again.

It's worse.

Daniel's moving now like he's got Johnny's number. His defense becomes offensive, but only because he knows how to pit Johnny against himself. They cross the mat twice and Johnny strikes out, but Daniel goes down and hooks his leg – he does the fucking slide tackle.

Johnny lands with bruising force on his face. He registers the hand pounding his back a second later and wants nothing more than to stay down. Maybe if he lies there, they'll all agree to go home and leave him alone.

The refs call a timeout. He staggers to his feet, blood welling at his nose. They tell him to go see his sensei.

Johnny, you're a cream puff! someone shouts from the stands. He barely notices through the stinging pain spreading out across his face.

Sensei reaches for him when he's barely off the mat, drawing Johnny in close. He takes his face in a hard grip and wipes the blood away with his thumb. Johnny stares at him and thinks, please. Please help me.

Kreese says, “Sweep the leg.”

His breath is the first thing to flee. It must be smarter than the rest of him, because Johnny doesn't even get it at first. It's like he's temporarily lost the ability to understand English.

His silence is noticed. Kreese narrows his eyes. “Do you have a problem with that?”

He searches Kreese's eyes, looking for guidance, some kind of sign that this is all for some higher purpose. But there's nothing really there, only a cold hardness, a polished stone reflecting his shocked face back.

And like the ground has dropped away below his feet, he thinks – maybe that's all there has ever been. Maybe it's always been just Johnny, alone. He always thought following orders wasn't the same thing as making a decision. But he thinks of Bobby's face as he left the mat. He thinks of Daniel, crying out, desperate and hurt. This is all real. And it isn't Kreese on the mat across from Daniel; it's Johnny.

Kreese crowds him, looming. Johnny is intimately familiar with the body language, sickened by it; he uses it himself against other people all the time.

“I asked you a question, Mr. Lawrence. Do you have a problem with that?”

“Yeah,” he says, numb. Finally defeated. “I do.”

Chapter 47

Johnny feels very calm as he steps back onto the mat. He walks with an unchecked pace towards the red-shirted referee, who notices and turns. Daniel, meanwhile, watches him closely, brow pinched.

Johnny stops and raises his chin and says quietly, “I'm forfeiting.”

The ref's eyebrows jump. For a moment, with his expression of annoyed bafflement and the whole mustache he has going – for a moment, he looks bizarrely like Coach Reeve.

“*What*?” says Daniel from a couple feet away.

“You heard me,” says Johnny, and then, when the referee still stares at him: “Or, maybe you didn't. Sorry. I said—”

“Wait! Hey – he's not forfeiting,” Daniel tells the ref, limping swiftly forward. “Can you call a timeout or something, just – give us a second.”

The ref looks between them, arm already half up. “You want a timeout,” he says, checking, “so you can talk to each other?”

Johnny looks away from Daniel's determined face, thinking: why not. What else. “Is there a rule against that?”

“I honestly don't know,” says the ref, backing away. He turns and goes over to the announcer. They discuss it for a couple seconds and the two fighters wait it out, glancing at each other.

The announcer is slow in bringing up his microphone. “Ladies and gentlemen, we're extending the timeout so Lawrence and LaRusso can... talk.”

And, yeah, the crowd doesn't know what to make of that either.

Johnny and Daniel turn to each other under the lights. This close and not looking for an opening, Johnny can see the pain written all over the other boy's face. Surely he wants this to be over just as badly as Johnny.

Except Daniel whispers fiercely, “Don't you fucking dare quit now.”

He shakes his head, completely at a loss. “What are you—”

“We're going to fight. We're finishing this.”

“You're insane,” he hisses, glancing around at the murmuring crowd. “I'm trying to make a gesture here, and you're *insane*.”

“I don't want your pity,” says Daniel doggedly.

If they weren't standing in front of hundreds of people, Johnny would reach out and shake him. “It's not pity, it's *mercy*, and you have no clue what it means for me to— look, I just want this to be over.”

“This is over when I say it's over.” Daniel's sweating from the pain, but his eyes are uncompromising. “And it's not over. You don't get to walk away from me again. We're fighting.”

He thinks of Daniel running up against a player twice his size just for a chance of getting the ball to Johnny. Fearless, reckless, maybe kinda stupid – and all that just to pass the ball, because he trusted Johnny would get to the goal. He's looking at Johnny now like he wants to trust him again. Or maybe he's asking for Johnny to trust him.

The crowd is getting louder, restless. Johnny can feel Kreese at his back like some kind of omen of death. He shifts and starts to glance around but Daniel says sharply:

“Hey.” Johnny's eyes snap back to his face. “Forget them, man. You keep your eyes on me.”

From the side, the ref approaches again.

“You boys done with... whatever this is? We really do need to be getting on with it.”

Johnny puts his head back and they stare at each other. After a second, he nods. He turns back to the ref and says, “Sorry, uh – never mind about before. I guess we're fighting.”

“It's a karate tournament, kid,” says the man, giving him another funny look, “that's kind of the idea.”

They take their positions.

Mindful of what was said, Johnny stops looking around. He looks across at Daniel and just like that, the world goes quiet again.

Chapter 48

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It goes down as the longest final match in the history of the All Valley Under-18 Karate Tournament.

Spectators afterwards will confess to feeling a little confused, and perhaps kind of bored (“why don't they serve beer at these things again?”).

It doesn't even feel like fighting, is the thing. They move across the mat, Daniel's defense matching his offense, and it's like – it's like dancing. Like how people always said dancing is supposed to feel. Your partner anticipating your move, responding to it.

Johnny gets a point against Daniel, a surprise strike to the shoulder.

Daniel ends it with a simple kick to the chest, and neither of them realize it's over for the space of a moment.

But the world filters back in, unstoppable: people are cheering, and they are cheering for Daniel.

Johnny steps back; Daniel stays where he was. He doesn't get it yet.

But he gets it when the people converge on him on the mat, hands reaching to jostle and lift him up – you did it, look at you – and yet Daniel is still looking around, still—

Johnny steps forward and grabs the trophy from the announcer. It doesn't feel real in his hands, because, honestly, what does it really even mean. But he still presses forward to hand it to Daniel.

Daniel accepts it, hands stuttering under his at the handover. Their eyes meet and Johnny says – he says—

“Thanks.” Because other words would take too long, and no one else would get it.

Daniel nods and his eyes don't leave him, but he doesn't have a chance to say anything, because the crowd lifts and carries him away from Johnny.

The West Valley soccer team gets knocked out of the playoffs in the first round in an embarrassing 4 to 1 loss against Edison.

Daniel sits as far away from Coach as he can, crutches leaning beside him on the bench. He talks shit the entire game (mostly about their own players).

Thirty-four years later, old Matt Reeve can still be found shaking his head about the '84 season, if you get enough drinks in him. He'll tell you all about how that should've been the team to go all the way, and how he still makes sure to flip off the All Valley Sports Complex every goddamn time he drives by it.

Chapter End Notes

> ...fuck, well. happy 2021 everyone.
>
> if you're feeling disappointed/sad about these boys not kissing again, well, um
> check this out?

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